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SAINT ON THE MARCH

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SAINT ON THE MARCH

The Story of Vinoba

by

HALLAM TENNYSON



LONDON
VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD
1956

5497

First published May 1955
Second impression April 1956

90

104545

2000

Printed in Great Britain by
The Camelot Press Ltd., London and Southampton

*This book is dedicated to Vinoba's Great Ideal—
Sarvodaya, the welfare of all*

‘There needs not a great soul to make a hero; there needs a God-created soul which will be true to its origin; that will be a great soul.’

CARLYLE.

PREFACE

APART FROM THE many *Bhoodan* workers who treated a Western author as if he was their long-lost friend, I have three people to whom a very special word of thanks is due. The first is to the late Agatha Harrison, whose meticulous files first interested me in Vinoba and supplied later much of the background material for my book. Then a second is due to my dear friend Marjorie Sykes, of Sevagram, for a gesture of encouragement that I shall not easily forget.

The third I owe to Kamalnayan Bajaj, son of Jamnalal Bajaj (Gandhi's "ideal capitalist"). It was he who, with typical generosity, invited me to revisit India at his own expense so that I could see things for myself. The invitation was accepted. The result follows!

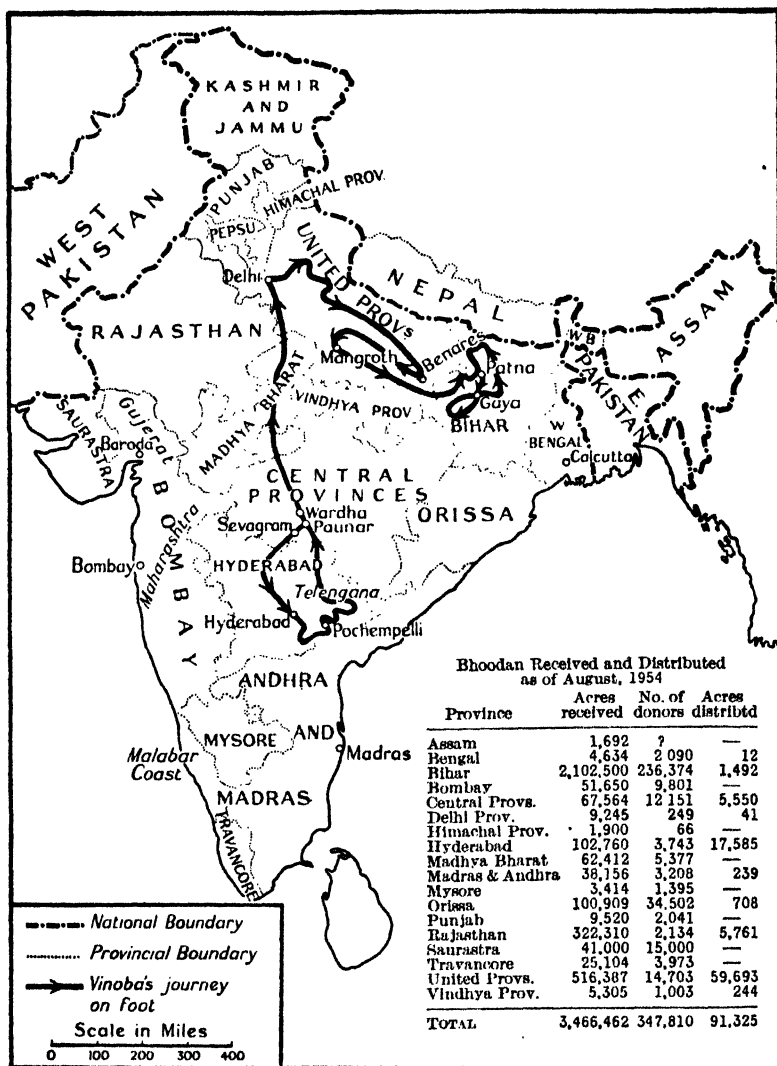
I am glad to say that Vinoba has given me permission to start a fund for the construction of wells in villages which have put all their land at the disposal of the *Bhoodan* movement. A proportion of the author's profits from this book will be directed towards this fund.

H. T.

February, 1955

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
1. SAINT UNRECOGNISED	13
2. A HOUSE DIVIDED	25
3. RELUCTANT LEADER	44
4. GANDHI'S SON IS COMING	53
5. "MOVE ON," SAY THE SCRIPTURES	67
6. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?	79
7. KEEPING UP WITH DADDY LONGLEGS	94
8. PIE-DOGS AND PHARISEES	107
9. "... ROADS TO BODH GAYA TEMPLE ...".	122
10. UNDER TREES OF ENLIGHTENMENT	133
11. COAXING THE FLAME	145
12. A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES	164
13. THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS	178
14. "WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?".	197
15. TO ESTABLISH RIGHTEOUSNESS	215



ONE

SAINT UNRECOGNISED

THERE ARE SOME days, crucial to our whole future, which seem at the time rather less noteworthy than those which precede or follow them. August 25th, 1946, the date of my first meeting with Vinoba Bhave, pronounced *Bar-vay*, had just this arrestingly ordinary quality. It was even a thoroughly disappointing day. A languid pony took my wife and me from Gandhi's *Ashram* (retreat) at Sevagram, where we were staying, through nine miles of dust, heat and monkeys to Vinoba's village. Judging from my diary, the minor discomforts of this journey made a much greater impression than did the meeting with Vinoba Bhave himself. Yet even then, although he was still quite obscure, those in the know looked on Vinoba as the closest of Gandhi's disciples. But we came away from our meeting thinking him no more than a very pale reflection of his Master's life-giving warmth. "It's so often the same in India," I wrote in my diary. "The great man imposes himself by sheer force of personality. His authority is like the spring of a watch and while he is alive everything goes like clockwork. Then the spring breaks. There is no substitute; the watch stops and goes rusty. So it is with Gandhi; once the old man's guiding influence is withdrawn his work will fall apart. X will start quarrelling with Y, B will refuse to accept the directives of Z—all of them good, admirable men, but, being Indians, no respecters of institutions and able to accept control only at the hands of a saint. Alas! saints like Gandhi have no successors."

Odd how blind I was on that oppressive August day. And yet, now I come to think of it, not quite so odd. Most Westerners would have been equally misled. The circumstances

SAINT ON THE MARCH

gave us some excuse. In the first place, the impact of Sevagram and the Mahatma was so great that our imaginations had neither time nor energy to react to Vinoba's totally different personality and approach. In my diary the bare entry recording our visit to him is wedged into pages of lyrical description of all that we had experienced during the rest of the week.

My wife and I had admired Gandhi from afar for many years, and had decided in advance that our visit to him was likely to prove one of the most interesting and inspiring of our lives. If it had proved otherwise, we would, I suppose, have had the courage to admit it. Luckily, no such readjustment was necessary.

Not that the visit, apart from being good, was at all what we had expected: but then half the fun of life consists in having one's predictions proved wrong—in detail at least. The day of our arrival at the small country town of Wardha—Sevagram is some six miles to the south of it—was bleak and overcast. A totally inert sky had dug itself into the edges of the undulating plain which we had to cross to reach Gandhi's community. The prospect was not unlike certain stretches of the East Anglian coast, whose total dreariness still preserves them from trippers. At length the *Asbham* appeared, a huddle of low-tiled huts in a dusty dip of the land. Beyond it was the once scruffy, now neat and industrious, village of Segaoon, renamed Sevagram, or Village of Service.

We had come, as it happened, from the midst of the Hindu-Moslem riots which had broken out in Calcutta—the first portent of the catastrophe that was to split India in two. For a whole fortnight the country's premier city had been a living nightmare—as if an atom bomb had paralysed its municipal nerve-centre at the height of a deadly plague. The paralysis was due to indecision. Those in authority were half-committed to one or the other side, and while they quarrelled with their consciences assassins took over and patrolled the streets like packs of ravening wolves. On one corner that we

SAINT UNRECOGNISED

had passed daily in our ambulance we had seen the corpse of a water buffalo swell to a hideous size with putrefaction, but on another, desolate and deserted since the fighting had passed over it, all the dead had been meticulously scoured to the bone by successive flocks of vultures. The sewers were overflowing: they had been blocked with the bodies of the murdered.

All these horrors gave us, we could not help feeling, a special if grim importance, for we were the first to arrive at Sevagram direct from the beleaguered city. My wife had worked in soup kitchens and evacuation centres; I had helped rescue isolated minority pockets and had driven an ambulance. We thought that our experiences entitled us, not only to views on the subject of the riots, but also to a long and important interview with the Mahatma in which we could air them. The events in Calcutta would surely be preying on his mind. Was not the India of his dreams vanishing even before it had had a chance to materialise? And the harmony between different faiths for which he had worked so long, where was that? We expected he would trace the failures of the past or estimate his hopes for the future in our presence. Perhaps we would be privileged with some classic restatement of faith. Messengers, we thought, even though they bring bad news, contribute their mite to history.

Our interview was indeed memorable, but not for the reason we had expected.

Gandhi lived in the centre of the community in one of the smallest huts. The room in which he conducted his business, sitting on the floor with a canvas back-rest, was about 8 feet square. Framed mottoes and mud mouldings decorated the walls. Its simplicity had an extraordinary elegance and style about it, much as the Canadian log cabins must have had in the days before pin-ups and glossy magazines. The hut was crowded with secretaries, disciples and wraith-like female attendants, and Gandhi was reading our letter of introduction as we came in. The letter told him of some of our exploits in the riots—among them the fact that I had been attacked by a

SAINT ON THE MARCH

Hindu crowd who had mistaken me for a Moslem because of my "imperial" (the Hindus do not normally wear beards and, if they do, they prefer them unkempt and prophetic). "You are preceded by a very loud blast of trumpets," the old man said, grinning toothlessly and somehow projecting his grin over the top of his spectacles. "All the same, I can imagine why those Hindus made their little error. And," he added, giving the English language one of the twists he delighted in: "I myself would certainly not have *mistaken* you for an Englishman." The next moment he was asking me about my religious convictions and congratulating my wife on looking so comfortable when she sat cross-legged. It was not until we left the hut nearly an hour later that we realised he had never mentioned the riots again. Instead, he had prompted us to talk about ourselves. To him we two ordinary mortals were of more importance than the news we might be bringing or the events in which we had been accidentally involved. That incident taught us more of the essential greatness of Gandhi than we had ever learnt from studying his speeches or his life. India called him *Bapu* or "Father." Before we met him this merely seemed part of India's passion for personalisation. But afterwards we realised that it was because Gandhi himself had such an amazing gift for personalising that he had become *Bapu* to others.

The day after our arrival Gandhi left for Delhi to attend the last of a series of important political meetings. It was during a tense moment of one of these discussions that he was to lean forward and ask a British delegate why he was spreading himself on the floor without the aid of a chair. Surely it could not be good for his digestive trouble to submit it to such a sudden and ruthless change of posture? After another meeting he sat down and scrawled—in his shockingly untidy hand—an enema prescription for some obscure village worker who he had heard was ill. For he lavished an extraordinary affection on people. Not the cool charity cultivated by saints nor the eager heartiness of the good mixer—both of whom, for their

SAINT UNRECOGNISED

different reasons, pride themselves on treating all men the same—but a personal ardour which made him treat everyone differently. Gandhi gave the impression that he loved you not only because you were a child of God, but because of the particular child you were.

Not that he was perfect. Far from it. He would not have been able to relish the weaknesses of others had he not shared them in some measure himself. There were odd corners of obstinacy and fanaticism in him; above all a strange capacity for deceiving himself with his own high-mindedness: the charade of the “third-class railway carriage” in which he always insisted on travelling and which in his latter years was equipped with every convenience; the occasion when, although protesting that he was not even a humble member of the Indian Congress (the political party that had gained the country’s independence), he threatened to withdraw from its deliberations if they persevered with the new President whom they had just democratically elected and of whose politics he disapproved. But blemishes show more clearly on clean linen than on dirty. And in Gandhi the surrounding purity was dazzling. In the final chapter of his life, the chapter that was just opening when we met him for the first time in Sevagram, he was to rise to a level of vision and conduct which no politician and few saints have ever equalled.

We stayed on at Sevagram for some days after Gandhi left. We had come to study its institutions and its village work. We saw the simple experiments in the improvement of handicrafts, all strictly designed to be within the limited means of the villager and to give to the country’s 300,000,000 villagers the initiative and moral power which industrialism and centuries of foreign rule had all but destroyed. We toured the farm engaged on “balanced agriculture”—an attempt to grow all that was necessary for the primary needs of the Indian village, the cotton being cleaned, carded, spun and woven in one of the *Ashram* workshops. We duly admired the movable trench latrine, invented to provide human compost (Gandhian

SAINT ON THE MARCH

reformers are preoccupied with the beauty of all that has to do with the bowels; it is part of their "life-affirmation" and a reaction from the taboos of orthodox Hinduism). Above all we enjoyed getting to know the Sevagram school, which related all the teaching to crafts and agriculture in order to provide an education which would make the village children more active, practical and helpful—better village citizens in fact. Normally, the educated in India are trained to despise manual work and to seek second-grade clerical posts in the nearest towns. Gandhi saw the disastrous stagnation that resulted from draining the progressive and ambitious elements out of the villages in this way, and he thought out revolutionary methods to reverse the trend. Yet it was not the theory of Gandhi's educational system which attracted us, impressive as it was. It was the way the theory was applied. It might so easily have resulted in monotonous drudgery. Instead the whole school gave an impression of dignity, personality and joy. The school was run by the children themselves—who elected their own "ministers." When the older children came back from marketing—for they organised the kitchens as well—even the onions were laid out in patterns on the larder floor.

Our friends at Sevagram thought our visit incomplete. The Mahatma's departure had deprived us of the opportunity of understanding fully the nature and spirit of the experiment which he had started. As a substitute we were told that we ought to meet Vinoba Bhave. We nodded politely and said we hoped we could. The name was difficult and we had not heard of it before. But the Ashramites persisted. Vinoba Bhave was the one person in India with a perfect understanding of non-violence, they said. He had joined Gandhi at the age of twenty, and soon afterwards Gandhi had said, "He has come not like the others to be blessed, but to bless; not to receive, but to give." That was in 1917, when Vinoba was twenty-two. Ever since Gandhi had regarded him, although twenty years younger than himself, as a teacher rather than a pupil. He had chosen him as the first person to court arrest

SAINT UNRECOGNISED

during the movement of individual non-co-operation, in the early days of World War Two, when the Congress protested against British restrictions on free speech and free political assembly.

By all means let us see him, we said, wondering why we had not made contact with him already in a community where all were so accessible. But we were going to-morrow, and so it would have to be that evening. Oh, if you want to see Vinoba, we were told, you'll have to postpone your departure. He doesn't live at Sevagram. In fact, he hasn't lived with Gandhi for twenty-five years. He lives in Pauniar, a village about nine miles away by road. Gandhi did not want him to stay any further away than that: every so often—once in two years, perhaps—he summons him over for consultation and the two friends sit alone in earnest discussion. Then Vinoba walks away again across the dry, undulating plain. You'll have to go over there after him. Start early by pony cart so as to be sure to find him free.

We postponed our departure and agreed to make the visit. That was how it happened—our "disappointing" day. Casually, it seemed, and almost by accident. The rains had cleared and it had turned suddenly hot. The road to Pauniar led down an avenue of *neem* trees, and all the way along the avenue monkeys had gathered in the shade for social intercourse. One group searched each other for fleas, another scratched their toes with twigs and lay back yawning, relaxed after a hard morning's work, while a third, having some sort of property dispute, stopped quarrelling to gape at us as we passed. Our pony was underfed, and we regretted not being in one of the local bullock carts, in which the animals are yoked and wear tasselled caps to protect them from the sun.

Vinoba's centre at Pauniar was on a hill above a river. The highest point was crowned by a castellated brick villa behind which was a 5-acre garden and a few cottages. The villa had been given to Vinoba by Jamnalal Bajaj, the Indian sugar king and a close friend of Gandhi's. Vinoba had consented to use it

SAINT ON THE MARCH

on condition that it was stripped bare of all furniture and ornament and its empty rooms with their peeling walls and grille windows gave it the air of a provincial jail. When we arrived we were told that we had been expected earlier—we had yet to learn that in Gandhi's India "early" meant not later than 6 a.m. and the time now was an indolent 8.15. Vinoba's hour for the reception of visitors had already passed and he had started his period of study.

The young man who had intercepted us foamed at the mouth in eager apology. Vinoba, he explained, was particular, and it would not be possible to disturb him. We glanced to the far end of the long veranda and saw a studious back bent over a pile of books. It was draped in a white cotton shawl, and above it was a tangle of hair, scruffy and grizzled. I *think* this was as much as we saw of Vinoba that day. I certainly do not remember his face and whether or not he was already sporting a beard. Vinoba himself has been unable to enlighten me on this; he does not know whether his beard is as much as eight years old. All that is certain is that it was fully grown by the time he came to be photographed in 1951.

We were given seats out of earshot and the disciple lectured us on his Master's life. He had that coarseness of enthusiasm which always repels me. In different circumstances one felt it might have been switched on to vacuum cleaners. It was a substitute for personality. Vinoba we were told was gradually freeing himself from the use of money. He himself never touched the stuff, nor would he allow others to touch it on his behalf. His own two feet, for instance, had long been his only means of transport—trains and cars were out of the question, since money was at the root of their existence. Even an ordinary bullock cart might have been purchased and not made at home. He had vowed, therefore, always to walk. We agreed that in the circumstances it was perhaps simpler for him to have made the vow.

Ah, but that is not the full extent of Vinoba's austerity! He gave up salt and spices in very early youth and now

SAINT UNRECOGNISED

he lived solely on curds. He took a vow of celibacy at the age of twelve and had found little difficulty in adhering to it. He would not interrupt his routine for anybody and more than one famous figure had fumed on that same veranda as a result: this was not due to any arrogance on Vinoba's part; merely to his belief in the importance of discipline. He was a great pundit in the literature of his native tongue, Marathi, and had taught himself fifteen other languages so as to be able to communicate with his fellow humans. I wanted to ask: But what can he possibly say to them that they are prepared to hear? For it appeared unlikely that anything effective could ever escape from such a bottle-neck of high principles. Even Gandhi used telephones, a pocket watch, other people's cars. Besides, Vinoba's asceticism seemed to lack Gandhi's salty and saving sense of fun.

In India religious cranks are even more common than in California. The lunatic fringe is a necessary background to the occasional religious genius who emerges from it. On that morning eight years ago we placed Vinoba firmly in the fringe. The visit dropped quickly through a hole in my memory. No circumstance connected with it stayed in my mind. I even forgot the hermit's awkward-sounding name.

Eight years passed—eight years which, as far as I was concerned, were largely wasted. I struggled to establish myself, to carve out a career, to reach the next rung of the ladder where all my competitors seemed to be crowded. Occasionally I lifted my head, looked back to India, remembering our meeting with Gandhi. They were arid years, years of retrenchment and undistinguished self-interest, in a world in which renunciation and non-violence—the ideals that Gandhi had stood for—seemed as remote as a Hans Andersen fairy-tale.

Then in May, 1954, I went to Bihar to study *Bhoodan Yagna*, the Land Gifts Mission, which was attempting to persuade the landlords of India to part with one-sixth of their land for redistribution among the landless poor. Since it had started in

SAINT ON THE MARCH

April, 1951, this movement had acquired nearly 4,000,000 acres, an area larger than the British county of Yorkshire or the American state of Connecticut (and India remember has five times more inhabitants per acre than has the United States). The leader of the movement, a fifty-nine-year-old man, wracked by dysentery, chronic malaria and a stomach ulcer, had walked an average of ten miles a day in order to obtain land. So far his pilgrimage had totalled 10,000 miles. He had become the largest landlord in the world. Practically unknown when his tour started, he was now openly spoken of as Gandhi's successor. At such an age his rise to fame seemed as legendary as Athena's birth fully armed from the head of Zeus.

The legend was awe-inspiring, and I approached the source of it in some trepidation. Was he god or man? The answer squatting in front of me was something of a shock. I saw a slender, smooth-skinned figure of somewhat neglected appearance, the hair bedraggled as if its owner had just woken from sleep and the beard frowsty and unkempt. The tent he was housed in had been pitched on an exposed and sandy hillside and contained a wooden bedstead with a criss-cross netting of string (called in India a *charpoy*), a few spinning wheels and a pile of newspapers. In externals, in things which depended on the looking-glass, the sight was hardly prepossessing.

The *loo*, the hot wind that blows from the western desert and gathers dust and temperature on the way, was blazing through the tent as if a malevolent deity had loosed it from the gates of Hell. Although sitting down, I found myself continuously mopping my forehead to prevent my spectacles misting over with sweat. The legend watched me with a gentle smile: "People have criticised me for coming to this part of Bihar for our Annual *Bhoodan* Meeting. But what does the heat matter when the heart is cool?" And I noticed that, although he too was wearing spectacles, he did not need to mop his forehead.

I noticed other things. However scruffy and undistinguished

SAINT UNRECOGNISED

one's immediate impression, all the uncontrollable things about him, the things which were unconscious and came from inside, had an extraordinary grace, style and repose. The back was straight as a bamboo, the gestures ritualistic, yet at the same time natural and unforced. The unwrinkled face—once you disentangled it from the beard—was completely ageless: it might have been that of a man of thirty or eighty. It was an effort to pin it down to a prosaic fifty-nine. Through it shone the eyes of a young man, grey-green and twinkling, as if impatient to break out of the mask becoming to a saint.

I had to stop noticing things. My interview was only due to last for half an hour. I had a whole agenda to get through. . . . I came to my last question. Inevitably, the hydrogen bomb. Everyone in India talks about that; it is like the weather in Britain or politics in France; it gives India such a gratifying sense of moral superiority *not* to have invented it. However unexpected this sage might be, I awaited, none the less, one of the stock Indian replies. Instead there was a noise halfway between a chuckle and a sucking of breath. "I don't believe God gave us such weapons merely so that we could destroy ourselves. And even if He did, then I wouldn't worry too much about it. It might be helpful in making way for a more successful substitute."

My half an hour was over. But it had been enough to convince me that the man I had been talking to was self-mastered and utterly given over to God. Under those few square feet of canvas faith and serenity could be felt like a field of electric force.

I stumbled out into the dust and glare, found a bench in the village street and sat down. Then, sniffing the traditional street smells of sweat and sweetmeats, I took a swig from my vacuum flask in which I still had a noggin of lukewarm, chlorinated water. Flies and children at once swarmed for nourishment. I smiled at both—exhilarated and curiously proud. Then, as I slowly screwed the cap on to my empty thermos flask, I knew that no human being had ever had on

SAINT ON THE MARCH

me the effect that this man had had in the space of half an hour.

The man's name? Vinoba Bhave.

At first I could not believe it. How could this be the same person whom we had seen from behind on that veranda eight years before—the faceless figure with whom we had failed to make contact and whom we had placed firmly in India's large lunatic fringe? Yet that frail scholar who lived on liquids and two skinny legs was now leading his country towards a social revolution unprecedented in the whole history of mankind—the revolution which Gandhi had dreamed about and which free India had almost locked in limbo. "Look here upon this picture and on this." What possible connection could there be between the two? What had happened to bring Vinoba into relationship with his fellows? How had the new strength fallen on him? Was it a slow, invisible transformation or a sudden torrent of flame? Why was India the one country in the world where such things could still happen? And could, even here, such a visionary movement really succeed?

That evening as dusk descended on the parched and dreary northern plain, I lay out in the open fields. The brick house where we were staying, though it might prove its owner's wealth, proved also its inefficiency compared to the mud cottage as a summer dwelling. It kept its occupants gently on the simmer all night long like a hay-box cooker. Outside as I watched the moon rise above slanting, metallic palms and felt the coolness that it shed patter down like a skirmish of fine rain, my mind was a fever of questions. I vowed to find an answer to them. This book is a record of what I found.

TWO

A HOUSE DIVIDED

THE FIRST STAGE of my quest took me back to Bombay—Bombay as it was six years before, when my wife and I were preparing to leave India for good. So much of what had happened then seemed to throw light on the future as well as the past.

Bombay is the exact opposite of Gandhi's India. You see that with a first glance at its architecture. Bombay is hideous, but alive. It is like some modernist nightmare in which buildings bend and grimace and talk. Every inch is carved with gargoyles, gods, lotuses, peacocks, swastikas and demons—each painted its own garish hue. What begins as a simple Corinthian column ends, as likely as not, in some tangled and malignant growth. Even the blocks of ferro-concrete facing the water-front and known as Marine Drive have their own absurdity. They were copied in grimmest detail from apartments in Stockholm planned to resist the cold. . . .

Bombay is garish for the same reason that Oriental birds have developed bright plumage—so as not to be swallowed up by sunlight. The Indian sparrow has the same markings as his European cousin, but splashed on with glossy instead of matt paint. The black necktie is made of silk, not cotton, and the chestnut on the wing feathers shines like varnish. It is the same with humans. Astonishing, sensual, exuberant, Bombay asserts itself against the glare. Every street is a symbolic drama staged specially for the visitor's benefit. And at night the players gather up their props and settle down to sleep on their stage. The pavements are transformed into a huge labyrinth of dormitories. Where else in the world could one wander at will watching 300,000 citizens settled in slumber?

SAINT ON THE MARCH

Yes, Bombay lives on its streets: and once one has seen them there is little else left. Behind the fantastic façade the rooms are dark and dim and smell like catacombs. Indoors all is inertia: the inmates are as limp as runners resting between laps, energy has been exhausted outside. Yet there are some, of course, who, once indoors, do not need to abandon their sensual display. Jute kings, sugar kings, Marwari merchants, successful contact men—people for whom money has proved not barren, but marvellously fertile. The Bombay millionaire in the marble hall that he has decorated with silver bathing nudes rests a distended paunch on bolsters and gorges from gold plate. But, whether rich or poor, Bombay gives little overt sign of the spirituality for which India is famous. It is much more like Babylon than the city of God. Seeing this, many Westerners assume a knowing smile and tell you that India's much-vaunted spirituality is a fraud. Others, less malicious, shrug their shoulders. "India, land of contrasts," they say, and leave it at that. But the ascetic India and this India, flamboyant, sensual, wickedly indifferent to the poverty tapping at its gates, don't contradict one another. There is a definite connection between the two. I was in Bombay when Gandhi was killed. I think that's when I began to find out.

The news came over the All India Radio on January 30th, 1948. First we were told of bullet wounds in stomach and chest. The worst was feared. Then the worst had happened and the radio instantly cancelled all its programmes and switched to devotional music on the lute, interspersed with impromptu speeches from those who had known the old man. Inevitably the citizens of Bombay poured in a slow, undulating white-clad stream through the evening streets. Amplified through hundreds of municipal loudspeakers, the music rolled us forward on a vast tidal wave of grief. The *bina*—or Indian lute—has at the best of times a black and cavernous melancholy but that night each note seemed a separate spasm of sorrow shaking a million hearts. And then Nehru was speaking in a choking voice: "The light has gone out of our lives . . . yet

A HOUSE DIVIDED

a thousand years later that light will be seen in this country and the world will see it—for that light represented the living truth. . . .” Sarojini Naidu, the woman who had once called a Mahatma “Mickey Mouse,” cried: “My father, do not rest. Do not allow us to rest. Keep us to our pledge.” In the next few days some dozen sane and healthy youths were reported to have died of broken hearts, unable to face life without the “father” whom they had never met.

It was then that I learnt the connection between the secret, ascetic India and the gorgeous East of which Bombay is a ragged echo. Had not the city plunged from one to the other in a matter of minutes? India knows the Golden Calf, but not the Golden Mean. If the lusts of “*kamini-kanchana*”—sex and money—were not so vivid and visible, what need would the ascetic have to react against them? In the West our exuberance is more disciplined. We don’t get our fingers burnt. Even if some of us amass millions, we live by the law of prudence and contribute to public charities. Yet in our eagerness to render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s, do we not sometimes forget how easy it is for Mammon to hide behind Cæsar’s face? Those mad about money in Bombay still know that they are infected with a fever and they hope that one day, when it has run its course, they will be able to shake themselves free. So they acclaim—not the magnate who piles up a careful annuity for his old age—but the one who renounces all he has earned in order to live alone and penniless on the banks of the Ganges. In Bombay—as once in Babylon—there is at least no hypocrisy: Mammon is quite openly alive and kicking. That’s why Gandhi was more at home there than in London or New York. The Hebrew prophets would have understood.

We too were swept with the tide of repentance that evening. How little we had done to live up to the ideals which we pretended to reverence. We rose on stepping-stones of our dead selves to the same old mess as before. And these trivial, squalid failures, multiplied a million times, ended in the

SAINT ON THE MARCH

evil that had brought death to Gandhi. There was personal grief, too, for after our visit to Sevagram we had met the old man often enough to think of him as *Bapu*. Underlying all this was a sense of dread, a presentiment of worse to come. Wasn't the assassination the prelude to a whole movement of apostasy and betrayal? The India that held up a distorting mirror to the vulgarity and money mania of the modern West was in the ascendant. The other India, the India that we loved, had suddenly mislaid its magic. Free, the country had started to abandon the uniquely Indian values with which Gandhi had tried to irradiate her fight for freedom. The "isms" were about to descend like a cloud of locusts and leave in their wake a desert as hideous as the Calcutta slums. Had Bombay's grief any real content? Would not the Bombay merchant continue to adulterate his flour with powdered chalk while the garlanded bust of the Mahatma watched mildly from his office walls? Wasn't the martyrdom which the bust would now represent perhaps even dangerous? To surround the old man with the halo of sainthood, to pretend that he was not like other men—all this was so much easier than the inconvenience of following his teachings. The Churches had tried the technique for nearly 2,000 years. By insisting that their Master was God, they had prevented His teaching from being taken seriously.

Gandhi, I reflected, foresaw all this long before it came, and long before anyone else could have imagined it. In 1929 an attempt was made by terrorists to blow up the Viceroy's train. The old man laughed, and said to a friend of mine who was with him at the time, "I shall be the next one." Then he added: "Congress use me as their tool: but the day will come when I shall say 'No' and our ways will part. I have told them this and they all know it." Extraordinary the lucidity that is the fruit of saintliness.

On August 14th and 15th, 1947, after 200 years of British rule and an even longer period of domination by Persian dynasties, the Indian sub-continent was proclaimed two separate,

A HOUSE DIVIDED

independent and sovereign states. But it was not the independence that Mahatma Gandhi had worked for. It had been preceded by the Calcutta riots, the murder and mass conversions carried out by the Moslems of East Bengal and the bloody retaliation exacted by the Hindus of Bihar. It was heralded in fact, by a sudden civil war, in which the Moslem majority areas had fought their way into the separate state of Pakistan.

Pakistan was the greatest victory of the Hindu *caste* mind. Traditional Hinduism divides every village into different quarters for the different castes and religions that live there, and enjoins complete segregation and partition in matters of food, drink, marriage and social intercourse. To the fanatically orthodox Hindu the Moslem is *mleccha*, or unclean. Jinnah, the creator of Pakistan, belonged to the Khoja Moslems of Kathiawad, converts from Hinduism who had retained Hindu social customs and the Hindu caste and family system while adhering to the religious doctrines of Islam. In the nineteenth century the Khojas had attempted to return to the Hindu fold. But orthodox Hinduism, though tolerant of the *beliefs* of others, does not easily accept excommunicates on the social plane. A fanatical counter-movement began, in which the Khojas completely identified themselves with Islam.

Jinnah's career was exactly to reflect his Khoja background. After more than forty years as a member of the Congress and an upholder of the cause of Hindu-Moslem unity, he suddenly changed his tune. He succeeded in persuading his Moslem fellow countrymen that they would never be accepted as equal citizens in an India that was predominantly Hindu. A large number of the Indian followers of Islam—perhaps the most socially and racially tolerant of the world's religions—became as fanatically narrow and caste-minded as an eighteenth-century Brahmin. They demanded complete partition and segregation from their Hindu neighbours. They decided to build up a state on purely communal lines, with separate electorates for the different communities and a national law

SAINT ON THE MARCH

based on the tenets of the Koran, and to call it *Pakistan*, or Land of the Pure.

It was the great tragedy of Gandhi's life that, although he succeeded in breaking the back of caste Hinduism, he did not realise until too late that its fatal infection had been transmitted to the Moslems. To him Jinnah's claim that the two communities could never live together in amity and goodwill was almost a blasphemy. Yet when the storm broke he accepted what had happened and bowed his head in sorrow and shame: he realised that Moslems could not be forced to live in the Indian Union against their will. It was then, when the breach was already sanctified by law, that he threw his great spiritual energy into an effort to repair the damage. He saw that there was only one way to bring the two halves of his motherland once more together. He must persuade the Moslems that fears of prejudice and persecution were groundless, and he must prove it in action. He died in the attempt.

All round him on Independence Day there were fireworks, flag-hoistings, wild rejoicings; he was loaded with tributes of homage and devotion. Yet "the Father of the Nation," "the Maker of our Modern History" was not deceived. He gave the widest possible berth to the councils of the new state. When freedom came he was living in a deserted house in Calcutta from which the local Hindus had driven away a Moslem family. On his entry into it he had been greeted with stones and catcalls. He had decided to settle there with a prominent Moslem until Calcutta showed a change of heart towards its Moslem citizens. He passed the day of independence in fasting and spinning. When the Government of India approached him for a special message, he, the architect of India's freedom, alone had nothing to say amidst the yards of speeches that were unrolled up and down the country on that historic day. They told him that if he remained silent it would not be good, and he replied: "There is no message at all. If it is bad, let it be so."

A few days later terrible slaughter broke out in the Punjab

A HOUSE DIVIDED

following the partition of the province between India and Pakistan and some 10,000,000 people—the largest and most sudden mass migration in the history of the world—changed countries. In October tribesmen from over the Pakistan border invaded the state of Kashmir—a Moslem majority province ruled by a Hindu Prince. India accepted Kashmir's accession and sent troops to defend it.

Gandhi watched the accumulating horror with sadness: "There was a time when India listened to me," he wrote. "To-day I am a back number. I am told I have no place in the new order, where they want machines, navy, air force, etc. . . . If they had the courage to say they would retain freedom with the same force with which they won it, I am their man." He saw only too clearly what had happened. What he had mistaken for *satyagraha*, or non-violence, in the fight with the British rulers was no more than passive resistance, the weapon of the cowardly and weak. Indians had been full of hidden anger against the British whom they had pretended to resist non-violently. Their resistance was, therefore, inspired by violence and not by a respect for the better element among their rulers which they ought to have awoken by their example. "The attitude of violence which we have secretly harboured now recoils on us and makes us fly at each other's throats when the question of the distribution of power arises. . . . Now that the burden of subjection has been lifted, all the forces of evil have come to the surface." Yet his buoyant humour did not desert him. "I have laboured under an illusion. But I shall never be sorry for it. I realise that if my vision had not been clouded by this illusion, India might not even have reached the point which she has to-day."

In the "madness," "the vain imitation of the tinsel of the West" and his own sense of utter failure Gandhi chose the release to which he always turned in times of doubt and darkness. He fasted. His first fast started in Calcutta a fortnight after the proclamation of independence, when the city was once again in the throes of Moslem-Hindu rioting. And

SAINT ON THE MARCH

something extraordinary happened when this seventy-nine-year-old man put his life humbly in Calcutta's hands. The forces of good were lifted from their inertia, the forces of evil brought low. Those who had thrown stones at him when he walked through their streets now came and gave him their Sten guns and hand-grenades as a sign of repentance. Joint processions consisting of all communities paraded the riot-affected areas in an attempt to restore communal harmony. The leading citizens signed a pledge in which they declared that they would offer their lives if the city's peace was broken again. Gandhi broke the fast. The pledge has been kept.

In two days he left Calcutta for the Punjab, but he never got further than Delhi. He found the capital full of refugees, bitter at all they had suffered in Pakistan. Every day the Moslem minority of the city was harried and their mosques and property looted in revenge. Some politicians were hinting that all the 35,000,000 Moslems left in the Indian Union should cross the frontier into Pakistan. Militant Hindu organisations called for an open war with their neighbour state. Gandhi was appalled at all this bitterness. Friends reasoned with him. How could he expect anything else until Pakistan had mended her ways and allowed her Hindu minority to live in security and peace? Thousands of Hindus were being murdered daily in Pakistan: for the Indian Union to show tolerance in such circumstances would be the merest cowardice. Gandhi replied in characteristic fashion:

"Imagine a rectangular frame without a slate. The slightest rough handling will turn the right angles into acute and obtuse angles, and if the frame is again properly handled at one corner the other three corners will be automatically turned into right angles. Similarly, if there is right conduct on the part of Delhi, of the Government and of the people of the Indian Union, I have not the slightest doubt that Pakistan will respond and then the whole of India will return to sanity." But the capital was in an angrier mood than Calcutta. His exhortations fell on deaf ears. The attendance at his evening

A HOUSE DIVIDED

prayer meetings dwindled. Someone called him the country's leading Moslem and the bitter little joke caught on. Gandhi was as vigilant as ever: "We are steadily losing hold on Delhi," he said. "If Delhi goes, India goes, and with that goes the last hope for world peace."

Early in January, 1948, he decided to fast unto death in an appeal to the conscience of the nation's capital. He felt "resourceless"; day after day he was tormented that he had no answer and no hope for the Moslem friends who came to see him. His son Devadas tried to dissuade him from taking such a drastic step at the age of seventy-nine, and he replied: "It was only when I had exhausted all efforts and realised my utter helplessness that I put my head on God's lap." He began his fast to the strains of Tagore's hymn: "If no one responds to your call, walk alone." He ended it six days later when the leading citizens in the capital had drawn up a six-point peace plan and the Government of India had handed over to Pakistan Rs. 550,000,000 (£42,000,000)—part of Pakistan's agreed share of the assets of the whole of India, which it had been withholding owing to the dispute in Kashmir. Just imagine what this meant. Imagine California's landed interests welcoming the return of dispossessed Japanese Americans by personally agreeing to repair and redecorate their property! Imagine the French being willing to absorb some of the refugee population of the Soviet Zone of Germany! Such things are comparable to what the Hindu leaders of Delhi agreed to do in order to save Gandhi's life.

But they could not save it. There were some in India to whom forgiveness of their enemies on such a scale and at such a price was madness—as indeed it has appeared to be throughout history to most of the followers of Christ. They were not moved to repent—merely cowed to a sullen silence. During the fast a band of Hindus had shouted "Let Gandhi die" under the windows of the very room where he was lying. (How can one avoid recalling the Passover crowd of long ago?) Nehru, hearing them, leaped out of his jeep in a fit of uncontrollable

SAINT ON THE MARCH

passion and threatened them with his bare fist. The militant Hindus, the hate merchants, bided their time.

He accepted his cup to the dregs. Eleven days later he said: "I am what God has willed me and I act as He directs. If He so chooses, He can kill me. I believe that I am acting as He commands me. I would very much enjoy living in the Himalayas"—some angry refugees from the Punjab had suggested that he retire there. "It will be a peaceful place. But I do not want peace of that sort. I want to reach peace through agony." It was his last prayer meeting.

After prayers he worked feverishly to finish an imaginary draft constitution for the Congress which he had suddenly decided to prepare. In this document he urged the party that had won India's freedom to abandon politics and to engage purely on work of social service throughout the countryside. "The Congress has yet to win economic freedom, social and moral freedom. These freedoms are harder than the political, if only because they are constructive, less exciting and not spectacular." "The Congress must be kept out of unhealthy competition with political parties and communal bodies. For these and other similar reasons, the All-India Congress Committee resolves to abandon the existing Congress organisation and flower into a *Lok Sevak Sangh*—Servant of the People Society." When he had finished the constitution, he was unusually agitated. He felt his head reeling. As he prepared for bed he recited a Hindu couplet to his granddaughter:

"Spring in the garden of the world lasts but a few days;
Watch the spring for a few days."

Next day he was calmer: his agitation had passed. But after his noon nap he told his secretary: "Bring me my important letters. I must reply to them to-day, for to-morrow I might never be." At 5 p.m. he went out to the prayer meeting, his arms round his two granddaughters—his "human walking-sticks" he called them. Passing through the congregation, he took his hands off them to answer people's greetings. All of a

A HOUSE DIVIDED

sudden a youth elbowed his way roughly from the crowd and confronted the old man. He fired three shots at point-blank range. Gandhi's hands, which had been raised in *namaskar*, slowly came down. He cried: "He, Rama—Oh, God!" His face turned ashen grey and crimson spots spread over his white shawl. Then he sank to the ground as if in a gesture of obeisance. Death came at once.

The youth was a Hindu named Nathuram Vinayak Godse. He was found guilty and executed by the due processes of law. He died unrepentant, firm in his conviction that he had served the cause of India by murdering her greatest son. Perhaps he was right, though not in any way which he could possibly have meant. The cause which Godse served was that of militant Hinduism. He wanted the new state to be a Hindu state in the same way that Pakistan was a Moslem state. He wanted the Moslems left in the Indian Union either to be evicted or to be treated as second-class citizens. He thought that to murder Mahatma Gandhi, the symbol of love and human brotherhood, was a short-cut to achieving his ends. But although he certainly killed the Mahatma, he gave new life to the ideals for which he died.

At first, of course, as in Bombay, all was drowned in lamentation. India was on the edge of a nervous collapse. The Mahatma's ashes were carried by special train throughout the length and breadth of the land and scattered from the banks of her rivers at points famed in myth and history. Huge crowds gathered to pay their last respects along the route—more than 100,000,000 all told, the largest public demonstration of grief in history and a longer funeral procession than that accorded to Abraham Lincoln.

Yet, along with this confused lament for the past, the country was afflicted with an almost total incapacity to think or feel about the present. Hitesh, an earnest young Congress friend of ours, almost wept when he recalled that only six years ago he had been in jail and that then, at least, he had known what he was living for. I suggested that he might like

SAINT ON THE MARCH

to have the British back in order to regain his purpose in life. But Indians, enormously good-humoured, are not usually humorous. Hitesh blinked and shook his head. "I don't think it would help," he said, treating my remark seriously. "It's our own leaders who are to blame. They are more confused than any of us. They pretend to be followers of Gandhi, and yet not one of them has the courage to put his ideals into practice. At the same time, they are afraid of copying the West. One day they praise the values he stood for, while the next a huge sum is allocated for setting up textile mills or equipping the Air Force with jet bombers. No country so divided and disintegrated in its own soul can achieve anything. Caste divisions and provincial jealousies will have all the time they need to gain strength. And in the long run only the Communists will benefit. No, if you want progress, you'd better go to Pakistan. There at least they are united."

We were sitting in one of Bombay's many coffee-houses as we talked. Fans croaked overhead with the monotonous regularity of the Indian cuckoo; turbaned waiters wove their way through the dense and steaming undergrowth. Right through the dark forest of faces—some lean, some plump, all grinning—one felt the same sense of bewilderment and frustration. I caught snatches of conversation with the new and insidious undertone I had detected in Hitesh. "Whether you agree with me or not you have to admit that the Communists are logical." "We need a strong Government." "Of course, I'm not a Communist, but the fact remains that only the C.P. knows where they are going and how they are going to get there." "Congress hasn't any future; only a past. In ten years' time the country is bound to be Communist." Chuckles and flashing teeth could not conceal the depressing state of mindless tension in which most of Bombay's youth were living. Parricide, I reflected, seemed to have left the country with an unresolved father complex. National loss of nerve and willpower, the quest for a quick, quack remedy—

A HOUSE DIVIDED

were not these the very things which sent a country whoring after the false gods of dictatorship?

We left India that March sick in heart and mind. On the boat, living among white people for the first time in several years, we exercised tolerance at having to eat with knives and forks inadequately washed in the ship's kitchen (so much more hygienic to use one's own right hand, whose cleanliness one can oneself control), to teach ourselves other Western habits—such as saying "Thank you so much" when the waiter offered us *pâté Windsor*, which tasted—as all English cooking seemed to taste to us for the next few weeks—like an infusion of hot cotton-wool (Indians never say "Thank you"; it is considered an insult to treat the normal courtesy of others as though you had not expected it), and to acclimatise ourselves to the drab misshapeness of half-naked Western figures on the sunny deck among whom the Indian travellers showed like a bed of sprawling peonies in a garden of straight, stiff pinks.

Yet India was a tragic as well as happy memory. We had found the ideals we had sought—the possibility of a new order of society based on non-violence, of a new method of meeting national and international disputes, of bringing spiritual force into relation with twentieth-century life, a revolutionary call, in fact, to reshape politics more in accordance with the precepts of Jesus than Christendom had yet managed to achieve. But at the same time the ideals which Gandhi's India had given us seemed fatally blighted even as they were given. If Indians could not—even at the moment of his apparent triumph—keep faith with what the old man had taught them, how could we, returning to a world which already possessed the atom bomb and was soon to possess its even more terrifying successor, a world of mass organisations, mass armies, mass education, mass entertainment, mass mind, manage to give any effective witness to these ideals? In this we were obviously in exalted company. The tributes paid to the Mahatma at his death by every Western statesman and newspaper were a truly

SAINT ON THE MARCH

frightening example of double talk. All had acclaimed him as once more showing the world the only true path to peace. Yet not one of them evinced the slightest intention of following him. The difference between ourselves and these worthy moulders of public opinion seemed to be that their hypocrisy never reached a conscious level, while ours—which was worse—did.

Indians freshly arrived in London with news of their country whom we met during the next few years did little to relieve us of our dilemma. They made appreciative, accommodating and wholly delightful guests, but they assumed an expression of petulant disdain when questioned about conditions at home. The Government, one gathered, was hopeless—a collection of mad cranks, repressive dictators and ineffective nitwits. If you pressed for specific indictments, you were told that the “irrigation projects were a failure.”

“Already?” you asked; “But surely none of them were even supposed to be finished for several years?”

Then: “India didn’t need large-scale irrigation projects.”

“You mean she needs thousands of small wells?”

“Oh, no. Not that. That would mean too many trained workers. She just doesn’t need projects of the kind the Government is putting up.”

And then—probably quoting from some abusive and not too well-informed pamphlet (new democracies are full of them): “You see, these dams give *too much* water. It means that the land they irrigate can only produce rice. This won’t allow for rotation of crops or cattle pasture.”

“But surely there’s some gain in them? I mean, weren’t many of the areas completely barren before?”

“Oh, no. They didn’t site the projects in any really important areas. I know of one place, for instance, which needed a dam far more than any of the sites they chose. But, of course, they didn’t go ahead with that because of vested interests.”

And so it went on through the whole depressing range of national life. One assumed at first that the captious attitude

A HOUSE DIVIDED

developed under alien rule had hardened into a habit, but this was wrong. When questioned as to what sort of government the country needed, the general answer was not, as in the past, "More power to *us*"; instead, it was "Democracy is beautiful. But in India it just won't work. We need a government that is strong." Politically, India had lost faith in herself.

"But isn't Nehru strong?" you might ask. And here the ambivalence of Indian politics became even more pronounced. It was admitted that during the first shocked weeks after the assassination, Nehru had emerged as Gandhi's political heir. His firm stand for tolerance and a secular state, the ideals for which Gandhi had died, had given him a position of unrivalled prestige and popularity, and cancelled almost overnight the increasing opposition and dislike with which he had previously been surrounded in the Congress. Full citizenship for all minorities, the complete divorce of any particular denomination from the State, universal adult suffrage, the abolition of "untouchability" and a complex machinery of parliamentary democracy—all this had been achieved in the record period of three years under Nehru's guidance. At times he had been even dictatorial in achieving it. Yes, "Panditji" was right there at the top and no one was going to *displace* or *replace him*. And yet, at the same time, he was also held, by some odd twist of Indian logic, to be a prisoner of the party that he dominated. He could do nothing radical because "they" would not let him.

His role, then, was that of Hamlet: chosen to avenge his father's death, and prevented, so we were told, by others from putting any scheme into effective operation. Yet somehow his intrinsic nobility and high-mindedness shone through. Everyone who met him recognised a prince among men: with his melancholy, brooding—and sometimes flashing—eyes, his firm, honey-coloured skin, the elegance of his home-spun Gandhi cap and high-buttoned *sherwani* coat and his courteous accessibility to foreign journalists, despite the tremendous burdens of office which he never laid down. He had the imperious

SAINT ON THE MARCH

and princely temper, too, just to complete the picture (we met two people who had had books hurled at them).

Such a man might indeed have "proved most royally."

And what of the Gandhian constructive workers—those who had worked with the old man on his projects for uplifting the peasants? Had they no leadership, no word of inspiration? "Oh, them!" Here an expression of utter contempt appeared. "It's a wonder that Gandhi did not see through them while he was alive. There's X. She's a junior minister now and wears silk *saris* and travels around with three servants. Then there's Y at the head of the So-and-so Secretariat: he's got two nephews, a niece and all three sons into important posts in Government departments. As for the rank and file, the lesser fry—well, I suppose they are still in the villages failing to persuade the peasants to spin yarn in return for a few annas a day. In spite of all the noise the constructive workers have made, our village people remain as apathetic and helpless as ever."

Perhaps, I thought, pondering on these last words, that was the root of the problem. Gandhi the politician had won freedom for his country and Gandhi the saint had by his martyrdom even managed to quell communal hatred—since this was a poison spread by the educated and by the inhabitants of cities. But he had not succeeded in changing—or charging—the hearts of the poor peasants, the "dumb millions" living in the country's 500,000 villages. They regarded him as a legendary and semi-mythical being—yes; but their minds remained quite closed to his revolutionary ideas of village development. He had carried out innumerable and important village experiments, but before Independence he had had neither time nor opportunity to link his findings to any effective national campaign.

To-day the real gulf between the educated, politically-minded Indian and the illiterate, half-starved peasant, the gulf which Gandhi had always known of, opened its terrifying void at free India's feet. Who or what was going to fill it? Nehru's

A HOUSE DIVIDED

apparent vacillation between various pressure groups in the Congress was not due to any intrinsic weakness in his statesmanship or character, but merely to the fact that such politically-conscious groups were the only organised forms of public opinion. Even though he might want to initiate a revolutionary programme of social and economic change, he could not do so since the very people whom this programme would benefit were not organised and not ready to give the programme the popular support which, in a democracy, could alone ensure its success. And Nehru was a democrat—a passionate and a loyal one—to whom the methods of Mao's China, which had begun to impose agricultural progress by force and terror, were abhorrent. His princely figure, acclaimed and idolised—and guarded wherever he went by hundreds of military and special police—could not cross the gulf. He was only Gandhi's political heir—not a saint nor a changer of hearts. And I could see that my Indian friends, in all their wild and irritating criticisms of what their Government was trying to do, were expressing their terror of this gulf and what might come of it. They were afraid that nothing could fill the gulf quick enough. They believed in democracy, but they were sensitive enough to realise that democracy begins in the hearts of men. And how could democracy have any meaning for millions of their countrymen, almost mindless in their utter poverty and despair?

We were in Paris on a winter holiday when the results of India's first national elections were announced: the largest free election in history, with an electoral roll of 176,000,000—most of whom were illiterate and two-thirds of whom actually voted. There were big Communist successes in the dense and more educated south, and also in Hyderabad. One afternoon we sat in Ram's room in a scruffy Latin Quarter Hotel. Ram was an artist friend of ours who spent the time he was not painting (which was considerable) lying on his bed beneath an enormous and crumpled mound of newsprint, commenting on the world scene. Currently he was analysing the election

SAINT ON THE MARCH

returns issued by his Embassy. Although he was a south Indian, it was the results in Hyderabad which interested him most.

For some time after the State of Hyderabad had been absorbed in the Indian Union certain rural areas in the state had been under a reign of Communist terror. Communist bands living in the jungle had murdered landlords and divided up their lands among the people. The police and the Army had only recently managed to round up the leaders of these gangs and put them in jail. The people, it was held, had not liked their taste of Communism, even though they had benefited from it. And for this reason the Government had decided to release the Communist leaders from jail a few weeks before the elections were due, to allow them to re-form their party and to put up candidates. It was felt that their failure at the polls was certain—particularly in view of the fact that they had so little time in which to prepare their campaign.

But in fact the Communists swept the board constitutionally in all the areas where they had previously ruled by force. In some districts they even had the largest majority of any candidates returned to the Central Assembly. Before the statistics reached us, I had been arguing with Ram that the country of Mahatma Gandhi could never turn Communist. "There what did I say," Ram exclaimed, reading out the figures. "Hyderabad will be the Yenan of the new India. This one tiny area where Communist rule has been tasted will give the whole country the same insatiable appetite. It'll spread out everywhere—just as it did from North China." Needless to say, Ram was not a Communist himself. He was non-political in fact. A detached student of the scene. Yet I could not help sensing a note of relief in his voice. At least the mail-clad monster rising from the abyss would lead the way to order—and any kind of order was better than the present unlovely and uncertain chaos.

Ram forgot to mention—or perhaps he did not know about it—something else which had happened that year in

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Hyderabad. I myself did not read of it until some months later, when the news was already a year old and still no more than a handful of people had seen it as a portent. An elderly disciple of Gandhi's had walked alone into the Communist-controlled areas of the state to find out for himself about their condition, and to see if he could do anything to spread the message of non-violence and goodwill. He had started to collect lands from the landlords for voluntary redistribution among the landless poor. In under two months' walking he had obtained 12,000 acres. His name was Vinoba Bhave.

THREE

RELUCTANT LEADER

VINOBA HAD NOT wanted to go to Hyderabad. Greatness was thrust upon him—first by helpless colleagues yearning for leadership and then by the cunning of circumstance. To me the fact makes him more rather than less great. Few people in a position of mass leadership can ever have been so completely free of the urge to power—but then few people have waited till they were in their fifty-sixth year before feeling ready to risk exposure to the urge.

In 1948, a few months after Gandhi's death, those who had been associated with the old man's village work and who had resisted the lure of high office met at Sevagram to found a new Society. Already independence had disillusioned them with politics. Such success as Gandhi's social programme—cottage industries, decentralisation and non-violence—had obtained seemed to have been due to its political significance as an attempt to undermine British power rather than to any real acceptance of its message on the part of politicians. And now that Britain had left, the politicians regarded it as no less outdated than the head of George VI on their postage stamps. What were his disciples to do? They decided to forgo any further flirtation with politics and to concentrate on the change of hearts and the spreading of that revolution in morality in which all Gandhi's ideas had had their roots. The new society which they founded was called the *Sarvodaya Samaj*. *Sarvodaya* was an expression Gandhi himself had coined in translating Christ's phrase, "unto this last." Literally, *Sarvodaya Samaj* means "Society for the Welfare of All." Vinoba refused all official position in this new society. He was afraid lest it became a Gandhi cult.

RELUCTANT LEADER

He said: "The *Sarvodaya Samaj* . . . is not just an organisation. It is a mighty word expressive of a revolutionary idea. . . . Organisations do not possess the power that great words have. Words have the power to make as well as to unmake. They can elevate and also degrade men and nations. We have adopted one of these great words. What does it signify? We do not want the rise of the few; not even of the many, nor of the greatest number. . . . We can be satisfied only with the good of one and all, of the high and low, the strong and the weak, the intelligent as well as the dull. The word *Sarvodaya* expresses this lofty and all-embracing sentiment." Yet however lofty and all-embracing, the new word did not very noticeably catch on. Gandhi had linked his ideas with India's immediate need for freedom. In the absence of a similarly practical goal in which their ideal could take root, the *Sarvodaya* workers seemed doomed to the slow exhaustion of reformers swimming against the tide.

Every year the Society holds a gathering in a different part of India for the refreshment and encouragement of its members. That for 1951 was scheduled for the beginning of April in Hyderabad. This province was chosen both because of the Communist disturbances there and also because it was the last of the old Princely States to have been included in the Indian Union and had had little opportunity of hearing Gandhi's social message.

Vinoba was sceptical of conferences. For two years the Government, as well as his *Sarvodaya* colleagues, had been attempting to thrust him into the position of Gandhi's successor. He had travelled in the north of the country, addressing meetings, attending deliberations, negotiating with officials. For some time he had even been installed in Delhi, where he had given a daily prayer address from Gandhi's Cremation Ground. But second-hand haloes don't fit, even when handed to you by others, and Vinoba had felt that his words came from a world which the country had already forgotten. He decided to withdraw to his 5-acre plot in Paunar and to

SAINT ON THE MARCH

intensify his experiment in self-sufficiency and freedom from money. It was an act of renunciation; perhaps, too, a tacit admission of defeat.

His colleagues squatting together at a committee meeting in Sevagram were horrified when he said that he would not come to Hyderabad to guide their deliberations. Without him the conference would be a waste of breath and money. If *he* had no inspiration for them, then the cause of *Sarvodaya* was indeed doomed. Communism was bound to come unless Gandhi's way was actively adopted: it was the only other alternative for the leader-forsaken, half-awakened and desperate masses to the chaos disguised as democracy which independence had brought. Vinoba continued gently to shake his head. Then someone said: "In that case, the conference will have to be cancelled." All eyes were turned to Vinoba. He looked round at them one by one. No one spoke for a moment; then the committee resumed its discussions. Vinoba started to spin. Ten minutes later he looked up quietly: "I'll go."

His colleagues relaxed. But they had another surprise coming. They had assumed he meant to go by train—the distance was over 300 miles and the conference was due to start in a month. But when Vinoba called for a map and began to trace his route they realised their mistake. They were distressed. He had made a free use of trains during recent years. Was it wise to impose this sudden penance on himself with a duodenal ulcer that was still active? In Vinoba's reply there was no trace of penance or false pride. "I know it is only a night's journey from Wardha to Hyderabad by train," he said. "And I do not want to boycott the train or even aeroplanes. On the contrary, I would like aeroplanes to be even swifter than they are at present. But everything has its uses and its limitations. Glasses are useful, but they cannot replace the eyes. They can assist them. Similarly, we need machines of high speed. I do not hate them. But our legs, too, are not without some value. In the old days our ancestors used to carry Ganges water to distant parts of the country. This tradition brought people together

RELUCTANT LEADER

and the whole country experienced a sense of unity. But what is the picture to-day? Hundreds gather at the booking offices without knowing the people in front or behind them. Nobody has the leisure to take an interest in anyone else. A journey on foot, on the other hand, will help me to get to know the country and to identify myself with the poorest in the land, who cannot afford to use any other means of transport. That is why I have decided to travel by foot."

He left Sevagram before dawn next morning. The inmates gathered to sing a farewell hymn, "God is the strength of the weak, so I have heard." Vinoba was shaking all over, as if with a fever. Perhaps some prescience of the gravity of his decision had suddenly struck him. Then he pulled himself together: "Your hymn has given me immense strength," he said. "Its author had only heard that God was the strength of the weak. I have known it, seen it, experienced it. I would sing therefore, not 'so I have heard,' but 'so I have seen.' I am weak, but your love has given me strength."

That day he reached his own centre in the village of Pauniar. His workers protested at his pilgrimage. "Does the *Sarvodaya* Conference imagine that you are their bridegroom and that marriage cannot take place without you? Come back and look after your own institutions and workers." Surely we are the people to whom you really belong, they meant.

Vinoba looked at them. He has a habit when moved of sucking at his lips and drawing in his cheeks: it is one of the few signs of emotion which he still allows himself. Could he not tell them when he would return, or where he would go from Hyderabad? He did not even know that. He was in God's hands. Perhaps this very meeting might prove their last. Not given much to histrionics, he spoke in his usual quiet, melodious and matter-of-fact voice. But it was obvious that his decision meant much more to him than others could guess: a final and sudden conversion from the luxury of seclusion and self-sufficiency. Who knew where that would lead him?

And so the little party of pilgrims padded off down the hill

SAINT ON THE MARCH

and over the nearby river, where strange white rocks glimmered in starlight. Each pilgrim carried a bundle of clothing and a spinning wheel encased in a rectangular wooden box. They needed nothing more. They would trust villagers on the way for food and shelter. For a moment, watching, it was hard to recall that the twentieth century was already more than half over. The storm lantern which Vinoba carried—it would be the party's only light until the sun rose—was also their sole visible concession to the Christian era. Vinoba was well in the lead, as he has been every morning since, for he walks at a brisk four miles an hour. At the bottom of the hill on the far side of the river some villagers were waiting with garlands. Vinoba took them as he passed, but he did not stop to put them on. The image of the bridegroom was certainly apt. He was running towards the future as if to a marriage bed.

Six years ago the state of Hyderabad was under a régime that had more in common with Persia at the time of Salamis than with most states in the modern world. Its 82,000 square miles were the personal property of the Nizam, who had been in the habit of granting tracts of it to ex-Ministers and other officials as a sign of grace and favour. These feudatories leased the land out to a further set of middlemen, who charged the final tenants an increasingly extortionate rent. Politically the state was a vacuum. The Nizam kept a harem of 300 wives sent to him by aristocratic Moslems from all over the world in a vast stucco palace, like a temple converted into a general store. He was the absolute ruler of the state, appointing his own Executive Council and, before 1947, there was scarcely any State Congress, for Gandhi had said that India's struggle was not against her princes, but her British rulers, and that the former struggle could not start until the latter was over.

On Independence Hyderabad was a large question-mark in the heart of India. A Hindu majority area, entirely in the hands of its Moslem ruler and ministers, it was yet firmly wedged at the core of the Indian Union. None the less, an extremist

RELUCTANT LEADER

Moslem sect, the *Razakars*, took charge of the country and called for its integration with Pakistan. The Congress and the Communists, in temporary alliance, went into underground opposition. In September, 1948, the Indian Government marched. The Nizam gave way after a token skirmish or two and the last and largest of the sub-continent's 365 Princely States, and also the only one that had tried to resist the merger with force, became part of the Union.

History hand-picks her hunting grounds, and Hyderabad was her first choice in free India. It was not, however, in the state's capital city to which history was instinctively drawn. This, with its trim fretwork of minarets round an ornamental lake, resembles a set of pavilions put up for a party that never took place. The Nizam still lives on in his stucco palace, *Rajpramukh*, or Constitutional Prince, with a handsome state grant to help maintain his 300 wives. But an intrepid Hindu lawyer has threatened to indict him in the High Court on grounds of discrimination against the opposite sex—an offence under the Indian Constitution. The wives, so he says, are not only persecuted, but underfed. Outside the city lie acres of untenanted greensward. Impossible to-day to picture the bristling British moustaches, the thoroughbred English ladies in picture hats and the even more thoroughbred ponies that once peopled the polo fields. Hyderabad City is altogether too clean, too frivolous, too decorative for the high-minded muddle of modern India. The city, however, lies engulfed in the well-watered but undeveloped plains and forests of the state, from which the wealthy once subsidised their civilised urban pleasures. Here the peasants were not so starved as to be totally unaware of their condition. The land is potentially fertile and the cultivators were uneasy and resentful of the power of the absentee landlord. The Communists saw their chance.

When the interim Congress Government was set up after the merger with India, the Communists knew that their rival lacked the experience or capacity to deal effectively with the

SAINT ON THE MARCH

problems of independence. They therefore refused to surrender their arms, and went into underground opposition against the very people with whom, a few months before, they had been co-operating. The Party was declared illegal and its members went into hiding in the hills and jungles, emerging at night to murder landlords and divide up their lands among the poor. The villagers dared not disclose the rebels' whereabouts for fear of their reprisals. And, anyhow, most of them mistrusted the police as much as they did the Communists. They were caught in a murderous crossfire, in which 3,000 people are reckoned to have been killed. Success went to the heads of the Communists. They were convinced that in the rest of the country, too, the inert, incoherent and top-heavy Congress organisation would stumble, like the Kuomintang, to a corrupt and incompetent doom and that the whole of India would tumble into their lap like a sleepy pear, if only they waited long enough. Alarming, India on the whole agreed with them.

But not Vinoba. As *he* drew near the troubled state, his power and confidence marvellously increased. In the villages he stopped to open wells and temples for *Harijans* ("Children of God," as Gandhi called the untouchables), calling the whole village together and leading the outcasts himself to the water and shrines from which, till that moment, they had been debarred. He persuaded those who complained that their children had no education to start village schools of their own and open them to all. When one village prepared a raised and garlanded dais for his prayer speech, leaving the ground in front untidy, he said: "What do I need bowers and garlands for? Isn't the sky beautiful enough?" Then he left the dais and came down to sit with the children. Walking through lonely forests at dawn, he burst into song—reciting verses from the Indian classics recording the journeys of ancient sages through the undergrowth. "The jungle, not the city, is the abode of the wise." "If we would work well," he said, "we must have a stream of joy within." He ran a high temperature, but he

RELUCTANT LEADER

refused to stop: walking would act as a nature cure, he said—and it did.

His fame began to run ahead, like a favourable wind. In one village hundreds of women advanced to welcome him bearing spinning-wheels. From another he was escorted, long before dawn, by children carrying auspicious lights like a swarm of fireflies. A ninety-year-old aboriginal bent down to touch his feet. Vinoba enquired whether he wanted to live longer. The old man unconsciously quoted the song of Simeon: now that he had seen the Lord's face he could die in peace. After a particularly tiring day in which he had conversed with nearly 2,000 villagers, Vinoba's companions were worried lest their leader was overtaxing his strength. He quickly settled their doubts: "To-day I have been visited 2,000 times by God," he said. Even in the country at large his journey began to arouse an undercurrent of excitement. The Committee in charge of the Sarvodaya Conference issued a warning that larger numbers might attend than they were able to provide for, and advised visitors to bring their own grain.

As Vinoba entered the Communist-controlled area, the Hyderabad Government offered him an escort of armed police. The police, he said, would, of course, be welcome as ordinary members of his party—as long as they were in plain clothes and without arms. This was at Balkonda where, only a few days before, several villagers had been murdered by terrorists. But when Vinoba came there was such a large and quiet crowd settled round his hut that he held his prayer-meeting two hours earlier than usual.

To those who wanted the police to deal more drastically with the Communists, Vinoba said: "The police are not expected to think out and institute reforms. To clean a jungle of tigers, their employment would be useful. But here we have to deal with human beings however misguided. When a new idea is born new repression cannot combat it." To the Communists themselves he spoke with a calm and ruthless affection. "You are like doting mothers; you love the masses and want

SAINT ON THE MARCH

to ruin everyone else for their sake. But doting mothers end by ruining their children, too." When a hailstorm fell one night, with hailstones as big as bricks flattening the crops, Vinoba quietly noted the Communists' satisfaction. To them it was another opportunity for working up resentment among the poor, but Vinoba accepted it for a different reason: it gave men the chance to co-operate, to help each other, to forget barriers of caste and class. Perhaps, he said, in this lay the reason for all so-called "acts of God."

In Hyderabad City he went to the jail to visit the Communist prisoners. "Give up violence," he asked them, "and help me to find a peaceful way out of our problems." Unless they gave up violence, what they had done in Hyderabad would stand as a warning—not a promise. The prisoners could not give him the assurance that he sought: the Party would have to be consulted, they said. But it was two hours before they allowed their visitor to leave—and only then with marked reluctance and respect. As the days passed the man and the occasion seemed to be drawing gradually closer.

It was in a village called Pochempelli that they coincided.

FOUR

GANDHI'S SON IS COMING

VINOBA REACHED Pochempelli on the morning of April 18th, 1951. His colleagues had tried to persuade him to turn north after the end of the *Sarvodaya* Conference and to walk straight home. But he refused. He still had not visited the heart of the Telengana district, where the Communists had established their firmest hold. Although he had not disclosed it—even to those who were walking with him—it had always been his intention to go there.

Three years later I followed Vinoba's trail to find out from those who lived in Pochempelli how the *Bhoodan* Mission had started and what were its achievements in this, its first village. I did not go on foot, but the thirty-mile journey by jeep from Hyderabad City took me almost as long as if I had. "You can reach it in forty-five minutes," said the head of the state *Bhoodan* Committee. "The road is excellent." As he had made the journey several times, I for once accepted his estimate (normally risky to do so in India). Unfair, perhaps, to criticise him since we never found any road at all, but, bouncing across parched rice-fields, arrived, bruised, after four hours. By what possible coincidence could Vinoba, if he had not stuck austerely to his two feet, ever have got there at all?

The country of Telengana is *kachal*, red, sandy soil covered with scrub and palms and a sparse stubble of millet sown once a year between them; but there is plenty of water, glittering through the tall palms like bits of metal. Most houses have their own wells and, with care, irrigation and soil fertility could be greatly increased. The village of Pochempelli is beautiful. Its main street, leading from the turreted police station at one end to a lake and prayer dais at the other, is

SAINT ON THE MARCH

flanked on both sides by fine two-storey buildings with jutting, latticed windows. Everywhere there are gardens behind high, thatched brick walls—the brick a mellow dun colour peculiar to the locality. The day I arrived the houses were gaily decorated too; the parched pause between harvest and monsoon is the wedding season for Hindu and Moslem alike and the season when, although they can least afford it, villagers spend all their savings and fall into the hands of the moneylender.

Outside a low house three men were talking. The tallest in the middle was Ram Chandra Reddi, the landlord who had given the first land and thus initiated *Bhoodan*, the gift of land. His arms were round his two companions' shoulders, with whom he seemed on affectionate terms. I jumped out of the jeep and ran towards him. We were expected. We were expected since early morning in fact, and the food was spoilt and his wife had gone off to a wedding. I was introduced to his companions. One was his brother-in-law and a Communist Member of Parliament; the other, his cousin, also a Communist. Being a happy joint family, they were planning the cousin's wedding. India is really wedding-mad in May. The three men were laughing and touching each other on hands, cheeks and shoulders with the frank affection common here among men. I lost inhibitions: "It certainly doesn't seem as if you gave your land to *Bhoodan* out of fear of the Communists, like I've heard people say."

Ram Chandra dropped his arms off his companions' shoulders and closed his eyes with sudden solemnity: "I've always been a rebel. All our family are rebels. But I disagree with Communist methods, and until Vinoba came I was puzzled what to do. The Communists say they can introduce an era of love and justice by terror and bloody idiocy and lies. I never believe that."

"Your *Bhoodan's* a sham," the cousin said. At this Ram Chandra laughed again, flinging up his arms in comic astonishment. The first moment of meeting was enough to convince one that he was a man of more than physical bigness. His

GANDHI'S SON IS COMING

changes of mood were sudden—and each equally dramatic.

"Such a sham," he said, "that when you came out of prison and saw what it does, you immediately give half your lands to the poor as well."

"I didn't give them to *Bhoodan*."

"No; but you wouldn't have given them at all if Vinoba wouldn't have been here."

"I always intended to give them."

"We'd believe your intentions, cousin-brother, if you had given evidence of them before your neighbours set the example." The Communist relatives bursting shabbily from khaki trousers looked undistinguished beside Ram Chandra's gaunt, prophetic figure, loosely hung with shirt and *dhoti*: one more example of how perfectly the simple Indian dress expresses the personality of its wearer. It was evident, too, that the relatives had no particular relish for an argument in which they had often been worsted before. Ram Chandra completed their discomfiture with a caressing pat of infinite charm and condescension. "You mustn't think badly of them. They are really quite good boys. Vinoba stayed at Narayan's house when Narayan was in prison. He knows that some of the Communists are not just criminals, and that they tried to do what they believed to be right, suffering pains in the process."

The relatives were obviously on the edge of a dialectical explosion. Given one more provocation—so their looks said—and they could accuse us all of being the tools of capitalists and landlords. But they didn't get the chance. Once more deep in matrimony, Ram Chandra was shepherding them towards their bicycles.

And now it was we who were being swept down the village street by this extraordinary man, while he, without interrupting himself, waved us on in the direction he wanted us to go. "I came back from Jalgaon in the winter of 1951. I was Tahsildar there—collecting rents for one of the big landlords. Beastly, beastly job. And then I came back here after my father's

SAINT ON THE MARCH

death and seen the condition of my village. It was in the grip of Communists and I am shamed—as if going back to my job would be almost like absconding. I say: ‘Now Ram Chandra, here’s your chance. Live up to your ideals.’ So I write in on impulse and throw my job and I become a farmer. You see my hands? Real farmer’s hands.” He flapped them briefly in front of my face—large and blunt and leathery as saddlebags. “I’m a good farmer. I know I look like an intellectual and a Brahmin. But we Reddis all belong to *Sudra* caste, you know. Not quite *Harijans*, but real workers. We have worked so hard in fact that we’ve pushed the Brahmins right off their platform and put ourselves there instead. But I’ve never been shamed of being *Sudra* like some of the others. I’m proud to farm with my own hands. I use the *Japany* method of rice cultivation—in three years I have trebled our growing family rice. But that doesn’t satisfy me. The Communists are right. There was injustice and toddy-drinking and debt and litigation and mistrust in our villages. They are not paradises. But me—I didn’t like Communist methods. I was just waiting and going on with my work and wondering what I should do. Then Vinoba came. We had heard that an old saint was touring with a message of love. But we didn’t think much of it—our villages see much of old saints. We respect them, of course. Many of them are holy men, living on charity. God knows they deserve our respect. But we’re not so accustomed to learn any practical things from them. You see what I mean? They lift our minds to infinity and then expect us to keep them there. But I don’t think Pochempelli was so much in the mood for infinity just then. You hear the saying: ‘God speaks to the hungry from their belly’? But this man is different. He has overcome passions. But he doesn’t ask us to do the same. He takes as he finds. When he saw the condition of our village and the fear that was in it, he cries. Real, wet tears. I saw them. And—well, I don’t think we Indians much expect saints to cry. He sits over there in the Moslem prayer compound.” Ram Chandra waved at a derelict courtyard. “You see, none of us even could offer him

GANDHI'S SON IS COMING

shelter. That shows how much of interest we have. But it was lucky really because soon he was being visited by everybody—different castes and parties, etcetera, etcetera. And perhaps some didn't dare coming if he is staying at particular house, plastered with particular party placard——”

We had reached the dais above the lake. It was a concrete platform, crumbling at the sides. It was shaded by feathery *neem* trees—the evergreen Indian willow—that hid a fluting covey of cuckoos.

“This is where Vinoba comes that evening. Just about this time too. There was such a long stream of humanity behind him. All silent—even the children on their mother's hips are expecting something too and not quite knowing what it can be: 10,000, 15,000, 20,000 people, perhaps. Very many.”

I made a swift estimate of 5,000: divide numbers by three and treble distances—that is the Indian rule. Impassioned inaccuracy was part of Ram Chandra's way of making the scene vivid. His eyes, his mouth, his long-drawn-out gestures worked on every word as well. As he suggested the crowd, he flung up separate fingers; then, to create the effect of the long, slow crocodile in which they came, he brought his hands close to his face and seemed to be drawing a rope with feverish intensity between his eyes.

I could see the people as if they had collected there in front of us now, out of the lengthening evening shadows. All the fantastic colours of South India in the golden light. The younger women with sky blue cotton *saris* wrapped round their legs and *choli* blouses of salmon pink that allowed a band of dark skin to show above the waist; the older women no less daring and original in their colour scheme—brilliant scarlet bordered with as brilliant an orange and *cholis* of electric green—all of them chained and manacled in silver jewellery (I have seen one *Harijan* woman with as many as six pendants hanging from each ear) of a barbaric splendour likely to be the rage in Chelsea or Greenwich Village, but described by Vinoba as “a heavy punishment inflicted by the greed of man.” The men

SAINT ON THE MARCH

of Telengana scarcely less splendid in their poverty; enormous turbans of purple and scarlet looped over their left ears like the headgear worn by medieval aristocrats, jewellery in their pierced lobes and simple loin-cloths held up by elaborate silver girdles. The upturned faces patient, scholarly, ascetic: for Indian agriculture, where so much is done by hand, has moulded the peasants' physique to agility and quickness, giving them, even when they are well-nourished, a studious rather than a brawny look.

"You are as calm as ocean," Ram Chandra was saying. "For someone like you it will be hard to understand how it happened." I supposed he meant I had not spoken much. I got no chance to point out that he had not let me. "Vinoba is sitting there—below the dais. It is before prayer meeting and the crowd is squatting round under the trees looking up. He said that forty *Harijan* families have come to him in the afternoon to tell why they support Communists. Communists are only people ready to give them land, so what else can they do? Couldn't Vinoba ask Government to help them? And Vinoba replies: 'Of what use is Government help until we can help ourselves?' And yet he knows this reply is not enough and he is shamed by it and sad that he has nothing else to say to them. So now he is going to put the problem, the problem of these forty poor families before the village and see what the village can do."

Ram Chandra was sitting near him. Ram Chandra started to tremble. He stood up before he had thought about what he was going to say. There was a hush. How long he waited he didn't know—perhaps not more than a second. He remembered noticing the lake in the background, like molten brass. "Sir, I am ready to give."

"How much?" Vinoba asked quietly.

"As much as you need."

"I don't believe it," Vinoba said, as if speaking to himself. Then Ram Chandra took a dirty scrap of paper and signed away 100 acres. Vinoba almost snatched the paper and

GANDHI'S SON IS COMING

jumped up on the wooden bed he was sitting on. His famous tranquillity deserted him. With the cowl of his white shawl over his head, his skinny arms waving and his cheeks pumping in and out, he looked at once weird and comic—like a child dressed up as a ghost. The effect was endearing, and before they clearly understood what had happened the crowd was laughing with his own happiness. Vinoba asked the forty *Harijan* families to decide how they would like to divide the land and whether they wished to farm it individually or together.

The *Harijans* told him later that they would farm the land collectively. The various smaller caste groups among them—washermen, leather workers, weavers—already lived together as communities, eight families to a group, the houses of each community being built behind one wall, with a common veranda in the front. It would only need a small extension of this system for them to farm together with each group responsible to the whole *Harijan* community for their separate areas. Also, they said, they did not need more than 80 acres to start with—2 acres each. Perhaps the superfluous 20 acres could be used elsewhere.

This generous response excited Vinoba almost as much as Ram Chandra's original gift. He saw that generosity on the part of the landlords, if it was genuine and unforced, could prompt an equal generosity on the part of the poor. Who could have guessed that in India, where even bad agricultural land then cost as much as £500 an acre and where landowners are not prepared to relinquish a square yard without fighting for it in the High Courts, someone would ever have been prepared to give as much as 100 acres out of his own free will? And all that for the sake of his "class enemy," the landless labourer? And who would have thought that these very labourers would have decided that 2 acres were all that their own families needed and have returned the surplus? Ram Chandra noticed that, throughout the evening prayers, Vinoba—whose normal posture is that of a Buddha cast in bronze—could scarcely sit still.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

That night he did not sleep, and at 4 a.m. he sent for Ram Chandra: "We must make your gift into a trust," he said briskly. "Something has been lit here, and we must coax it before it goes out." Ram Chandra fetched three trustees, and, at the same time a committee was formed to supervise the redistribution of his land. The business was all finished by 5.30, when Vinoba was ready to move on to the next village. As he left he looked at the group that had gathered to say goodbye. "If every landlord becomes a Ram Chandra Reddi, we will achieve the Kingdom of God on earth."

"He was right," I burst in. "You ought to have gone with him. You ought to be touring your province instead of being stuck away here where nobody can meet you."

Ram Chandra swung his square face round like a searchlight. It was a serious, intense schoolboy's face, an overgrown schoolboy with grey hair. "My work is here in the village," he said primly. "Among those I understand and who understand me. Besides, we are having lots to do yet before Pochempelli becomes a paradise. You see, I have twelve children. Yes; a round dozen. And although I have given up to one-third of my 1,200 acres, I am not prepared to give more," and he hurled a hand into the air and held it there quivering high above his head, like the still-attached spirit struggling to free itself from the body. "Not yet at any rate. I have to think of educating them"—a heavy hand dropping slow as gossamer to his side. "Of course, such things won't matter when we have real equality and when each one of us is cultivating to his fullest strength. Then the Kingdom of God will be security enough and village community itself will look after our children. But we have a long way to go before that. And until then each has to think of his own, for nobody else will. Now come and visit our *Harijan* families and see all difficulties for yourself."

He leaped off the platform and strode over a hillock towards a group of houses, previously out of sight, which now appeared below. His long, erratic stride kept him in front, so that he

GANDHI'S SON IS COMING

had not only to bend down to talk to me, but to turn round as well. Most of the time, in fact, he seemed to be walking backwards, with myself running behind to keep up.

The *Harijan* houses were of brick with stone floors, the wooden pillars on the veranda were carved and decorated, and the wall round each separate compound or group of cottages was often as high as 6 feet. The houses, built by the *Harijans* themselves, were spotlessly clean and the walls were decorated (one with a pattern of match-box covers) with far more domestic taste than I had seen in the cobwebbed chaos of India's middle class. But the rooms were dark and windowless. I asked the reason for this, and was told that it was a precaution against thieves. In north India I had never seen a *Harijan* colony which would consider itself worth robbing—another proof that the condition of the peasants here was not as dejected as I had been led to believe. The land was potentially fertile, and for India, not heavily populated. Having got as far as this, the *Harijans* wanted to get further, while their northern fellows, having scarcely got anywhere had still to be stirred from protoplasmic apathy.

"They want more land," Ram Chandra said briefly, underlining my thoughts. He had been having an energetic discussion with a group of elders who leaned so biblically on their staffs, that I had imagined them engaged solely on quoting Holy Writ. One can understand Gandhi's worship of these people, who, in spite of being considered untouchable by the orthodox, often retain a dignity, culture, and self-reliance which their oppressors have long lost. "Of course, the 2 acres per family was enough when they started. They'd never heard of people who get land for the asking then. But now some other *Harijan* groups in the village have more than they have from *Bhoodan* and they are regretting not accepting those extra 20 acres."

"What did you tell them?" I asked.

"That they ought to be cultivating better first."

"Do they agree?"

"No. They say they can't use the *Japany* rice method without

irrigation. And they ask me when Government is going to give them money to repair the tanks that hold the monsoon rains and when they will finish the canal that will bring water up from the river. They are ready to provide labour free, but they need material. I tell them that Government have agreed for them to have loan to buy bricks. And they say: 'Why should we take loan? Government has started to build a shrine here in celebration of first *Bhoodan*. But those bricks will be more useful as lining of our tanks'."

"Sounds like sense."

"Of course it is," Ram Chandra laughed. "But it's the first time they have complained so frankly to me." He seemed pleased at the fact.

"Perhaps that was due to my being here," I said. "In the countryside I find folk who still seem to credit Europeans with some magic authority—even seven years after independence."

"Well, I'm in the village always. You may never come again. If they are frightened of me, they will do their complaining when I'm not here."

"Why should they be frightened of you?"

"I'm strong. I have a loud mouth and a quick temper. Besides, some of them still work on my land. I've a lot of violence in me, I'm afraid. Vinoba saw that. He said: 'You're very tall, Ram Chandra. You ought to squat when you talk to *Harijans*.' Perhaps he is right—though I think him joking at the time. But it seems we're beginning to understand one another after all, the *Harijans* and me—even though I didn't follow Vinoba's advice." And he engaged in an elaborate disentanglement from the *Harijans*, who were now thrusting beautiful children, baskets, blankets and other samples of their handiwork up for our inspection. As we walked back Ram Chandra said: "I'm looking for the right moment to give some more of my land. Sometimes I feel depressed and wonder when it'll be. But this evening it seems nearer than I thought."

GANDHI'S SON IS COMING

Ram Chandra's children were rolling in a golden pool of evening light as we reached his house. A flute tune curled up from the courtyard like a wisp of vapour. The grim torture of tropical heat gave the first moment of sunset a breathtaking sweetness.

"There are days which one will never forget," I said as we shook hands. "And this has been one of them."

"They say that Englishmen are reserved," Ram Chandra replied. "And when we first met I think they were right. For although I speak English you are the first Englishman with whom I speak it. But now I see that Englishmen are not all so practical as they say. Even Englishmen can be roused by a great vision."

"No; it's people who rouse me,—not visions," I said. "Or people that put visions into practice. Perhaps I'm more Indian than you realise——"

He gave me an intense look, pressing his quick, full lips into line. Then he frowned trying to see what I meant.

News of what Vinoba had done at Pochempelli passed from ear to ear on that first night becoming more legendary with each teller. Some said: "Gandhi has been reincarnated." Others: "Gandhi's son is coming to see us." Yet others: "Here is a god who has the power to give away land." Even before he reached the next village at dawn the following day its landlords were fully prepared to be fleeced. They were, as it happened, two brothers who had for years been locked in a family feud that had driven a wedge right through the village. The quarrel was further embittered by the fact that one brother was a Communist sympathiser, the other a member of Congress. Vinoba talked to them in the presence of the whole village.

"How long are you going to live?"

"One leg is in the grave and the other in the house," said the elder, quoting a local proverb.

"Surely you are too old then to gain anything from this

SAINT ON THE MARCH

quarrel? Hasn't it already cost you enough—lands, crops, family affection?"

"We shall do whatever you say to mend it," the brothers replied.

Vinoba sat them on the dais in the prayer ground that evening and told the audience of the quarrel of the two brothers, Bhima and Jarasandha, heroes of one of India's great epics who were reconciled shortly before their death in battle. He asked the two brothers to embrace. They did so, then promised to give 90 acres to the *Harijans* of their village and to pass the rest of their lives in service. It was as simple as that.

Vinoba left the province fifty days later. During those weeks—the hottest in the year—his party lived on a diet of buffalo milk, rice and lentils, and slept in open fields or with one cotton blanket between them and a courtyard of baked earth. Most of them were not used to such a life and yet not one suffered from illness. There are periods when, lifted out of ourselves, we fail to notice such things. By the time he crossed into central India on June 6th, Vinoba had collected 12,000 acres of free land. No single village in which he had stopped had refused gifts—making an average of 240 acres a day. Even the Nizam, reputed the most miserly man in India, had given some land. Tactfully, the quantity was not disclosed—even more tactfully, it was explained that His Highness did not like to boast of such things. In the next three years a further 100,000 acres were obtained in Hyderabad by the workers Vinoba left behind.

For the Communists Vinoba had a new message: "Why come by night? Why not come by day and loot as I do with sincerity and love?"

Three months after he left, when he was already deep in his northern pilgrimage, Vinoba heard that the Hyderabad Communists had pledged themselves to abandon violence and that those of them who were in jail were to be released to fight the elections which were due to take place in the last

GANDHI'S SON IS COMING

months of the year. They obtained forty-two seats in the State Assembly as opposed to the Congress's ninety-five and the Socialists' eleven. Most of their candidates were returned from the Telengana area, which they had terrorised and where peasants were still afraid to vote for any other party. At first their success seemed alarmingly solid. But it wasn't. *Bhoodan* had shown the elected Congress Government that public opinion was ready for radical land-reform and given them the courage to carry it out. They adopted the movement as their own, its head office is in the new Party headquarters—a palatial rabbit-warren burrowed from marble—instead of in derelict, dusty shacks near the municipal scrap-heap which a *Bhoodan* office normally inhabits. But more than that—the new Hyderabad Government abolished all classes of rent-receiving landlords more speedily than any of the other provincial governments, who had been discussing the measure for much longer, and they introduced a ceiling on lands (by which no family was allowed to own more than a certain quantity) which no other province has even yet had the courage to do.

Then, not long ago after this legislation had been carried out, Ravi Narayan Reddi, leader of the Hyderabad Communist Party, who had received one of the largest majorities in the whole of India, resigned his seat. His successor was heavily defeated by the Congress candidate. A group of Socialist M.Ps. assured me that this defeat would be repeated in nearly all the Communist-held constituencies at the next elections, and that those elected in the Communists' places would be—not Socialists, as they themselves were—but members of Congress. We were talking in a railway restaurant, where I watched how Indian tea is made (boiled with milk and tea leaves in an open pan and then squeezed by hand through a rag kept in the chef's pocket). When I could tear myself away from this fascinating but gruesome spectacle, I reflected that, if what my friends had said was true, then Vinoba's first tentative step towards a revolution through love had certainly been of crucial

SAINT ON THE MARCH

importance in the politics of free India. He had left behind him a more educated public opinion, and an atmosphere of trust and confidence in place of bitterness and bewilderment. His influence had been indirect, for he had passed on to others the courage to carry forward what he had begun. This was how "Gandhi's son" would have wanted it to be.

FIVE

“MOVE ON,” SAY THE SCRIPTURES

OF COURSE, EVERYONE said, it is only the special conditions of Hyderabad which made *Bhoodan* possible there. I said it myself when I first read the news items. “Hot ground is cooled by rain-drops” was how Vinoba put it. But he knew that, although the Communists might not yet be active in other parts of the Indian countryside, the whole of India was “hot,” although, perhaps, for different reasons.

He waited a few weeks at his *Ashram* in Pauniar. If God wanted him to continue his work, the opportunity would surely come. It did. In September, 1951, Nehru asked him to go to Delhi to discuss the Five-year Plan which the Government were preparing. He offered to fetch Vinoba by aeroplane so that he should not waste too much time. Vinoba said: “I will come, but in my own time, and walking as always.”

Once more his colleagues in the *Ashram* were a little resentful of his decision. Before telling them that he was going, he enrolled volunteers for an intensive drive towards the betterment of the villages round Pauniar. Complete freedom from the financial help of charitable supporters was to be the new slogan for Gandhian village work. “But how can we manage this programme without you to help us?” his colleagues bleated.

Vinoba’s reply was as sweet and devastating as usual. “You have had me all these years. Of what use would it be for me to stay further if you still have not learned to look after yourselves?”

They smiled wistfully, like children let off with a light scolding. Then those of them who had private or family lands came forward and laid them all at their master’s feet. He had

SAINT ON THE MARCH

said nothing, but that, they thought, must be what he expected. The village of Paunar, too, caught the infection of giving. As he left at dawn they gathered once more to watch him pass, and they gave him 60 acres. They stood watching him disappear briskly into the autumn mist. It is the last time that they have seen him. Even the neighbouring villages were not to be outdone. When he walked out of his "home country" two days later he had 600 acres. "What is all this giving? Have they gone mad?" asked Vinoba. There were tears streaming openly down his face.

The journey to Delhi was 795 miles. It was a triumph. Arbours of palm and mango leaves were erected for him to walk through. Villagers, ragged and with the visionary look of the semi-starved, half eternal vigil, half eternal trance, crowded round his feet. Although they adored him, they recognised him as one of themselves, underfed and without a penny to his name. How was it that the proud and wealthy came to feel the same identity? "If you had five sons," Vinoba said to the landowners, "you would divide up your wealth equally between them. Treat me as your sixth son. Give me a share of your land for the sake of *Daridra Narayan*—God revealed in the poor."

It is hard to refuse a saint as a family member. Yet sometimes they were slow to respond. The crops had not been good. Life was hard. They had their children to think of. The poor would not know how to make use of the land even if it was given to them. Vinoba leaned forward, the tip of his beard trembling a little. "Have you recognised me? Look closely at my face if you have not. For some years I was separated from you, although you are my own kindred. But I hope you recognise me now. If you do not, where shall I go for my rights? I may be compelled to go elsewhere." The mysterious words filled them with a sense of foreboding and shame. The eyes—at once humorous, grave, and extraordinarily clear—seemed to reach to some half-realised depth. They coughed and shifted a little uneasily. Now Vinoba was leaning back on

"MOVE ON," SAY THE SCRIPTURES

his bolster, eyes closed, as if exhausted. The landlords looked at each other. "We have so little left," they mourned.

Vinoba snapped upright. "You have more than anyone else."

Then, not looking at each other any more, the landlords retired sheepishly to a nearby tree, where they discussed their answer. It was invariably the same. They returned bearing gifts. "My dear brothers," Vinoba whispered to them. "Overcoming the passion of ownership will fetch you ten times greater and more real respect. Ownership compels you to lock yourselves in your houses or to flee to towns. But now you can move like monarchs as I do."

Vinoba was right. There was only one way to avoid being looted with love—to refuse to meet him or to flee to the town on the plea of urgent business or a dying relative, as soon as he drew near. But even then they were not always safe. In one village the landlords boycotted his meeting. He asked whether he might not be allowed to come to *them*. They dared not say "No." He had heard, he said, that they criticised him for being a friend of the Communists. "But some people criticise me for being a friend of the capitalists too. That two such opposite charges can be brought against me gives me courage. It shows that my work is on the right lines and that my message has been understood. The fact is, I am hungry for the love of all. To me there is not one single human being who does not possess divine qualities. All men and women, young and old, are but temples in which God hides. And thus I can approach them all without fear. With God's help, I can enter every heart. If I can be the agent of both the rich and the poor I shall be glad. For the poor I am striving to win rights. For the rich I am striving to win moral development. If one grows materially and the other spiritually, who then is the loser? Besides, what is land? How is it possible for anyone to consider himself the 'owner' of it? Like air and water, land belongs to God. To claim it for oneself alone is to oppose the very will of God. And who can be happy if they oppose His will?"

SAINT ON THE MARCH

These are my ideas. Let me put them before you and leave you so that you can work them out for yourselves."

But they did not need to be left; the spokesman of the landlords rose at once: "You have convinced us that you are our friend. We are Rajputs, the ancient warriors of India. It is our duty to fight for what we know to be good. We will give what we can."

Two months later, when he arrived in Delhi, Vinoba had collected over 17,000 acres on his way—more than 300 acres a day, an average 25 per cent. higher than he had achieved in Hyderabad.

From his reed hut built at Government expense near Gandhi's concrete cremation platform, he was trenchant about the Five-year Plan which he had been asked to discuss. It had forgotten the 500,000 villages. It made no attempt to promote small-scale workshops for the starving millions. It thought only of building huge industries and dams which by their very nature could give employment to a limited number, while at the same time destroying the few shreds of vitality which the peasants still retained. Just as the planners had reserved forests against the private axe, so they should preserve certain cottage industries from the axe of centralised mass production.

Yet Vinoba had no sympathy with those who regarded the Plan as no more than an electioneering stunt on the part of Congress. If that was so, why should the leaders of the Congress have asked *him* to discuss it with them when they knew that he was bound to disagree with much that it proposed? His criticisms of the Plan had been given in love—all men of goodwill could find something in the Plan with which they could co-operate.

He was depressed by the political miasma lowering over Delhi. "Many political parties seem to have but one programme—finding fault with their opponents. . . . Why need an election involve this fighting and back-biting among politicians? Why cannot the parties merely put their

“MOVE ON,” SAY THE SCRIPTURES

programmes before the electorate and leave the choice to the voter?” Before he left, the President of the Republic, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, to whom Vinoba had voiced many of these criticisms, came and offered him as much land as he wanted from his estate in Bihar.

From Delhi Vinoba went to Uttar Pradesh (the old United Provinces), where he had been invited by the Constructive workers. He was welcomed there by the State Government.

The United Provinces, if its borders be slightly extended to include Delhi to the west (which lies in a small administrative enclave of its own) and Patna, the capital of Bihar, to the east, is the stage on which almost the whole drama of Indian history has been played. Here came the “Aryan” colonisers of pre-historic times, inventing the careful complex of agriculture by hand and bullock which has continued uninterrupted till the present day. Here the Buddha preached and lived, and Asoka built up the only Empire ever maintained without arms. Here, where Hinduism ousted the Buddhists by persuasion, Hindu dynasties arose, extending their sway over almost the whole of India, to be conquered in their turn by the Moghuls, who established Delhi and Agra and the now dead and derelict city of Fatepur Sikri. Here the Mutiny of 1857 reached its crisis and the British imposed their final control.

To-day the state is horribly poor. Thousands of years of intensive agriculture and the gradual destruction of forests, once vast and tiger-ridden, have exhausted the soil. The fertile Gangetic plain, which once attracted settlers and cradled civilisations, has turned into a dusty crematorium. The villages, often surrounded by imposing battlements, carry an echo of magnificence. When he walks abroad, the villager is still armed with the *pasha*, or tribal spear, in imitation of the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic, and when he marries he hires a caparisoned elephant to take him to his bride. But for the rest of the year his life is bleached of colour. He scratches the barest pittance from the surrounding scrub. He is still scarcely touched by politics or by the industrial epoch. Metalled

SAINT ON THE MARCH

roads, electricity, drainage, motor-cars, steel ploughs, as well as Communist agitators, have yet to penetrate.

In the response that the province gave to Vinoba there was more than an echo of the heroic past. The Congress Government came forward with intelligent and practical support: they passed a law facilitating the transfer of lands without the payment of stamp duties, and they encouraged Congress workers to join the new movement. They also adopted as legal the document used by Vinoba in Hyderabad—"I from my total acreage give — acres to Vinoba for the use of his Land Gift Mission"—which is now in use over the whole country from Cape Cormorin to the Himalayas (those who have never been within 3,000 miles of Vinoba still give their land legally into his hands). The Gandhian constructive workers in the province, in whom inspiration had been replaced by a tepid piety, began to take new heart under Vinoba's direction. Work started in areas that he had never visited. Prominent among the local leaders of *Bhoodan* was *Baba* (Daddy) Raghav Das, who with knotted staff, matted beard and cloak flung carelessly across one bony shoulder, leaving the other bare, looks like an elderly John the Baptist. A Member of the United Provinces Parliament, *Baba* had shown a certain sectarianism in his campaign to oust Moslems from the sites of Hindu temples which they had converted into mosques 200 to 300 years before. But when Vinoba appeared he threw himself into the fray in earnest. Having no lands himself, he gave his annual income as a Member of Parliament for the purchase of property for *Bhoodan*. Soon he was leading an army of volunteer workers with a prophetic fervour and a twinkling, unprophetic eye.

The United Provinces is the land of Tulsi Das and Kabir, the greatest poets of medieval India—a land where the poets of different villages still compete at springtime in recitation contests, as they did once in Ancient Greece. When Vinoba came, singers went from village to village spreading the *Bhoodan* message to the accompaniment of cymbals or of a

"MOVE ON," SAY THE SCRIPTURES

banjo, home-made from a hollowed-out pumpkin. Old women, too tired to speak in a public meeting, crept forward at the dead of night to offer all they had. In the north, where Vinoba himself had not walked, a peasant with a large family, the owner of 50 acres, wanted to give his best twelve to the movement. He was told it was too much, but he clinched the argument by threatening to walk the 100 miles to where Vinoba himself was on tour and there to present his gift personally to the sage. Meetings were conducted in an atmosphere of almost evangelical fervour.

Imagine it. A village cowshed, previously derelict, hastily cleaned and decorated to receive the party. Clusters of mango leaves threaded along the rafters and looking, by the time Vinoba arrives, as shrivelled and dried as a roof of green rags. Mango leaves are used because they are auspicious and fragrant rather than because they are beautiful. The crowd is stifling, but not fetid—the Indian custom of a daily bath and clothes' wash sees to that. Vinoba is hemmed against the bamboo netting which forms the back wall of the shed and, in spite of frequent orders from the village Elders to sit down, the onlookers press round for a glimpse of the saint, quite blocking the thin ribbon of daylight between the high veranda and the overhanging thatched roof behind.

The national anthem is sung—badly. Only a couple of dozen seem to know it and the rest make a wordless noise halfway between expectoration and a cry of pain. The chief of the village elders gives a speech of welcome. "Oh, great and heroic soul, Saint Vinoba, whose fame has reached across the length and breadth of Mother India, may your joys be as sweet as the flowers with which you are garlanded and your sorrows as transitory as their fast-fading blooms." The Indian who wants to show off his education still revels in the use of "Sanskritic" words, just as we used once to consider it a mark of culture to strew our English with Latinisms. But Vinoba hates pompous and fulsome praise, and in this instance the metaphor misfires, since he has already torn off his load of garlands.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

A Moslem girl with pigtails and white silk trousers gets up—star pupil at the local *Madrassah*, Moslem religious school. She has an illuminated address written in Arabic script. But the light is so bad with the crowd pressing the last possible particles out of the courtyard behind that she cannot see to read it. After stumbling through two sentences, she is interrupted with good-natured applause, then sits down in tears while the address is handed up to Vinoba.

He acknowledges her efforts quietly and quickly over folded palms.

Still sitting bolt upright, but glancing round the crowd and sucking his lips, he seems to be waiting, without impatience, for the one moment that matters—the moment when they can get down to business. Perhaps this is it? No, of course not, Hem Babu, the chief landlord, has still not spoken. What will he say? Vinoba is staying in the village as his guest, and all day his host has been tactfully steering conversation away from anything as controversial as the ownership of land. He has dropped a few hints, though. His family circumstances are difficult. He himself would like to give—but, alas! his brothers are away from home and he hasn't had time to consult them. Perhaps when they return . . . Vinoba already knows the type well. He will wait to see what others do first in order to give the smallest amount needed to save his prestige. And that exactly is what Hem Babu tries to do. For about half an hour he balances eloquently on the fence in a series of elaborate and orotund phrases, quotations from scripture, felicitous flights into Sanscrit. The speech has the desired effect. The villagers understand not one word and are thoroughly bored. The whole thing is clearly a *tamasha*, a circus in which the bosses exhibit themselves, are gaped at and go on their way, more remote, more inscrutable than ever. The giving of land is the last thing that any of them have contemplated.

But then Vinoba is speaking. He starts quietly—too quietly. No one can hear a word he says, there is an uproar as each shrieks at his neighbour to stop talking. Vinoba raises his

"MOVE ON," SAY THE SCRIPTURES

voice as best he can. It is the nearest he can get to a shout, for any other villager it is a sound well below normal speaking tones. But a sudden silence has descended. Crying babies are pressed to the folds of their mother's *sari*. The simplicity and utter directness of Vinoba's words has come as a shock.

They must not think, he says, that because he is staying at the house of Hem Babu he is the friend of the rich only. Hem Babu knows that he is like a guest who comes to set fire to the property of his host. Only *his* arson is done, not in secret, but in the open. He asks the host himself to light the faggots. Supposing he cannot persuade his host to do it? Supposing the rich refuse to give lands? What then? He has been in some villages where the rich do not give at all and where only the poor give. His Socialist friends often criticise him for accepting such gifts from the poor, but he himself values them more than the generosity of those who can afford to be generous. Does it not show the wonderful mercy of God—that He makes those who are rich in wealth poor in heart, and those who are poor in wealth rich-hearted? Besides everyone who gives is like a volunteer who enrolls himself in a crusade for justice. And of what use will the crusade be if only the rich take part? The welfare of all means that all must help each other. And there is another reason why he likes to receive the gifts of the have-nots. It helps to ignite a spark of charity in the hearts of the "haves."

Vinoba pauses. He looks round. "Is there anybody ready to help our revolution through love—no matter how small his contribution?" No one stirs. "If there isn't, it doesn't matter. To-morrow I shall walk on to the next village. 'Move on,' say the scriptures. And I shall not cease moving until my mission is fulfilled. If it takes 1,000 years, I am ready. God will move the hearts of others in His own good time."

There is whispering. Then Mangru shoulders his way forwards. Mangru is an "untouchable." He has a loincloth grey with age and a strip of even older and greyer loincloth cut up to serve as a turban. His feet are wrinkled like a lizard's

SAINT ON THE MARCH

skin and the gap next his big toe could hold a florin. He prostrates himself, but Vinoba restrains him. Mangru has a quarter of an acre. But although his family still live in the village, he doesn't need it. He has a job in the tanning factory of a nearby town and that is enough to support him and his children. There are those in the village who have no work and no land either. Perhaps this small plot might be useful to one of them. He would like Vinoba (he calls him *Dada*, elder brother) to take it. But Vinoba remonstrates: "I did not mean to take land from such as you."

Mangru's hands are still folded in supplication. "I want *Dada* to take it. I do not want it for myself any more."

Vinoba accepts it—calls for a piece of paper. All are pushing round to see what is going to happen. Hem Babu's silk shawl is trampled on. Mahadevi Thai, Vinoba's faithful nurse and attendant, has the bamboo fan knocked out of her hands and is pushed several yards down the wall by the human tide. The elders have to threaten with their fists in order to keep the village at bay. Vinoba has made out a gift deed in Mangru's name. Someone reads it aloud, since Mangru, of course, cannot read. "I have received this day a gift of $\frac{1}{4}$ acre from Mangru in the village of Saon. Since Mangru belongs to the class for whom I am attempting to obtain gifts through my *Bhoodan Yagna*, I hereby empower the Village Committee to return the land forthwith and ask Mangru to accept the gift as *prasad*." *Prasad* is food offered to the Deity, which, according to Indian custom, cannot be refused when distributed after worship among the congregation. Mangru attempts to prostrate himself once again, then accepts the gift deed as reverently as if it was a crown of gold.

Vinoba looks round: "God has answered my prayers. Now I know that there must be many more in your village who are ready to give." A forest of hands goes up. Vinoba's secretary cannot keep pace with all the gifts. There are bursts of shouting and clapping, such as greet the convert when he publicly confesses his sins. Messages are sent to those who are still

"MOVE ON," SAY THE SCRIPTURES

absent. At last there is a rustle of silks and Hem Babu levers himself upwards, stomach and all. Mangru, a mere landless "untouchable" has endangered his reputation. Dare he risk appearing both impious and mean? This time there are no fat phrases.

"Vinobaji is right," he says. "Even the poor should be encouraged to give. That is why I did not give first. Perhaps the rest of us will think our village has done its duty if I give first. But now is the time for me to speak. I have 857 acres. Subject to my brothers' consent—and I am sure that they will consent—I would like to donate one-fifth of this quantity. And I hereby promise that my donation will consist of none but good land."

There were many Hem Babus. There were ministers, party secretaries, owners of temples, minor maharajahs who were shamed, flattered, moved or inspired to join in. Soon the United Provinces was yielding an average of 1,000 acres a day. Then this average was up to 2,000, and a month later it reached 3,000. When he left the province after just under a year, Vinoba had walked 3,800 miles and obtained 300,000 acres, 232 wells, 34 pairs of oxen, 7 houses, 1 hotel, 11 ploughs, 130,000 bricks, 15 bags of cement, 4 ponds, 4 irrigation wheels, £200 worth of implements, about 2,000 trees and nearly 1 ton of seeds.

At the 1952 Annual Conference of the *Sarvodaya* Society, held near Benares, Vinoba staked his claim. He wanted the society to take a vow to collect 50 million acres—one-sixth of India's total cultivable land. It was an area larger than Great Britain and nearly as large as the American state of Colorado. It would mean a plot of 5 acres for every Indian family now reported to be landless. Vinoba himself vowed never to stop his pilgrimage and never to return home to Paunar until this target was reached. As a first stepping-stone, he set a target of 2½ million acres to be reached by the time of the next conference but one, which was due to be held in April, 1954. When he spoke, the total collected after exactly one year's work

SAINT ON THE MARCH

stood at 170,000 acres. The *Sarvodaya* workers accepted the targets with a slight gasp of astonishment, then in a business-like manner started to arrange quotas for each province and to set up provincial committees so that the quotas could be fulfilled. *Bhoodan*, which had started as the solitary vision of a saint, had become a national movement.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

A NATIONAL MOVEMENT to solve the problem of land ownership by voluntary gift in a country the size of India, a country burdened with a complicated feudal system of land-tenure and a dense rural population whose land hunger pushes sky high the price of each single acre! Could anyone but a saint—or a lunatic—seriously envisage such a thing?

Now that *Bhoodan* was no longer merely a local charity, a growing number of voices were raised against it. Some of its opponents were rationalists, honestly and openly shocked by this sudden eruption of faith; some agricultural experts, their minds full of statistics and blue prints; some left-wingers whose ideology forbade them to believe that capitalists were human; some right-wingers who hated the thought of losing an iota of their power. These voices have never coagulated into a formal opposition. They have not had the courage: even the Communist Party dares officially do no more than damn with faint praise. "*Bhoodan* is all right as far as it goes," they say: or "Of course, Vinoba is genuine, but he has been duped by the landlords."

Vinoba welcomes criticism and sifts and considers it with tireless patience. When the city sophisticate says, "But *Bhoodan* is only able to transfer land in such small quantities. Surely this fragmentation of holdings cannot be right?" Vinoba replies: "I am more concerned with the fragmentation of hearts than holdings. What we need first is to satisfy the basic need of our peasants, the need for some land—however small the amount. Besides I don't believe that small holdings are uneconomic. At present 60 per cent. of our holdings are below 5 acres. We have 60 million families—with an average of five members each—earning their livelihood off the land. And

SAINT ON THE MARCH

we have 300 million acres of cultivable land. That means, if the land were to be more equally divided, an average of 5 acres per family—and so we would in fact be raising the holdings of 60 per cent., the majority, and reducing the holdings only of a minority. That doesn't look like uneconomic fragmentation to me."

Here the Communist chimes in: "Five acres per family is too low. We need collective farms."

"But Japan," Vinoba replies "has a national average of just over 2 acres per family and yet the standard of living of her farmers is much higher than that of our own. Surely what we need is not *extensive* collective agriculture as in Russia, but *intensive* family agriculture as in Japan. Mechanised farming might be common sense in a country like America, which wants to save labour. But in India we have a surplus of labour and our problem is to increase production through an intensive use of this labour. I do not see how this can be done except on the small family farm."

"Then you are against co-operatives?"

"By no means. I want co-operatives, but I want them to grow from grass roots: not to be imposed from above. How can you introduce co-operatives when our peasants don't even know how to read and write? First let the peasants' elemental land-hunger be satisfied; then help them to see that by co-operating with their neighbours they can do certain things better than they do them now: dairying, stock-raising, ploughing, the acquisition of seeds, the disposal of produce. I would even have the crops to be raised in a particular area planned by the whole village in consultation."

At this the agrarian reformer breaks loose:

"But why are you against legislation? Surely it ought to be the Government's job to change the land system?"

"What is the Government? In a democracy, is not the Government the same as the people? It can only do what the people want it to do. Legislation needs the support of public opinion—otherwise it will fail or have to be imposed by force.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

or terror. So far in this country our land legislation has failed. We have talked about it, but when it has been introduced it has been a great disappointment. Why? Because neither the people nor the landowners are ready for it. In many provinces the system of *zamindars*, or rent-collecting landlords, has been abolished. The Government has become the landlord and the villagers are supposed to elect someone from among them to collect the rents and to hand them over to the Government. But what has happened? The *zamindars* have got themselves elected to the new posts and are now disguised as Government officials. They have also been paid compensation by the Government for the land they lost. I am not complaining about this. In a democracy it is perhaps right that landlords should receive such compensation. But you see the result? The Government being the people, it has to finance this heavy compensation by charging the people themselves the same rents as they paid to the *zamindars*. When therefore the peasants find that they are paying the same rents to the same people as before, do you expect them to agree that legislation changes things? Besides, what happens to the millions of landless labourers? Who has thought of legislating for *them*? The Government of a poor country such as India cannot afford to give them land free of cost. And the landless themselves cannot afford to pay for it. So their condition too remains unchanged.

"But I do not want to dispense with legislation. I envisage it, but at the end. The Communists also say they want legislation at the end. But where they would begin with loot and murder, I would begin with pity and kindness. When every heart feels that the present order is unjust, when pity is created and there is a proper understanding of the situation, then the right sort of legislation can come. I believe *Bhoodan* is the only way for a democracy like ours to bring about widespread land reforms. It changes the mind of the people and touches their hearts. This prepares the way for right legislation. And at the same time as it is doing it, *Bhoodan* transfers land to those who need it most free of cost. That is why *Bhoodan* is not just

SAINT ON THE MARCH

a visionary ideal, but an urgent and practical programme."

At this the left-winger says: "But how can you believe it possible that the landlords will voluntarily liquidate themselves? No class has ever committed suicide, and none ever will. It is against the law of psychology."

"Perhaps I do not know much about psychology," Vinoba replies. "But I have faith in the human heart. Your attitude towards the rich will make the good as well as the bad among them join together against you. What does that mean but that the bad gain more strength? You want a revolutionary programme and think that a revolution cannot be brought about without hatred and bloodshed. But you are not revolutionaries at all. What you want is merely that those who are at present happy and powerful should exchange places with those who are not. I do not call that revolution. I call that maintaining the *status quo*. *Bhoodan* is the only way in which the whole of our society can rise together to *eliminate* misery—and not merely to *transfer* misery on to somebody else, which is what you self-styled revolutionaries wish to do. Through *Bhoodan* the rich can save themselves from destruction at the hands of the oppressed. That is why more and more of them are coming to look upon me as a friend. The bee collects honey without harming the flowers. Cannot we collect land without causing harm to the landlords?"

"But why do you take so much bad land from them? The rich are deceiving you."

"It is true that I take all that is offered me in good faith. Even so, the amount of bad land that we have been given is not high—30 per cent. of the total, perhaps. When these lands are discovered to be bad—as they will be in time—the gift of them will recoil on the giver. We will not be injured thereby. Indeed, we will still be the gainers. For bad land has its uses. It can be used for house-building, tree-planting—in some cases even for pasture. When you were at school taking an examination, didn't you answer the easy questions first? So it is with *Bhoodan*. First the tendency will be to give bad land.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

But have no fear. The good land must inevitably follow."

And now it is the turn of the right-winger, the landlord himself to object: "But the landless are not ready to become proprietors. They know nothing about farming. Our agricultural production will decrease if the best land is not left in the hands of the educated who know how to make use of it." The objector is dressed in cloth as thin as butter muslin. His hands look as if they would shrivel at the touch of a plough.

Vinoba's eyes show a sudden gleam. Impatience? Irony? Indignation? He waits an instant before replying. He must find a way of identifying himself even with hypocrites. "If the landless cultivator, the very person whom we employ to work on our farms, knows nothing about farming, who is to blame for it? Surely we who call ourselves educated and who have so despised agriculture that it is considered an occupation fit only for a mindless serf. At present we, the so-called educated, consider farming to be beneath us. We take no interest in it, but use it merely as a means of maintaining ourselves in luxury through the toil of others. If we really consider farming to be a worthy occupation, let us prove it with our own hands. Let us turn ourselves into farmers and apply our much-vaunted intelligence and education to rural problems. That is the only way we can deserve our position of leadership over the peasants and improve the condition of agriculture. And, meanwhile, how can the landless labourer advance and overcome his inertia, his addiction to drink, his indebtedness? By having land of his own on which he can learn to develop skill, intelligence and self-reliance. It is not just the material conditions of our people—rich or poor—that we want to raise. We have to improve their moral quality as well."

In one form or another Vinoba repeated his arguments. But the protesters took little notice. They went on protesting—querulous, nagging, captious and continual. It was hard for those who prided themselves on their sophistication to accept the fact that something as simple as *Bhoodan* could possibly work. Varied and conflicting, however, the critics did have

SAINT ON THE MARCH

one point in common. How long would *Bhoodan* take? Even assuming that land continued to be given at the rate of 3,000 acres a day, Vinoba would need fifty years to reach the target of 50 million acres that he had set. It was all very well for a saint to say that he was willing to live for 1,000 years if it should prove necessary; the average human was in more of a hurry. Yet Vinoba's timeless trust in the Almighty was no excuse for dawdling, as his critics were soon to find out. Seeing that, unlike themselves, he felt no anxiety, they had assumed that he also felt no need of haste. But the two were not the same. As usual, Vinoba had made his vows in secret.

When he was satisfied that the *Bhoodan* workers in the United Provinces could achieve on their own the quota of 500,000 acres which they had agreed to collect before April, 1954, he announced his intention of moving on to the neighbouring province of Bihar. He rowed across the River Karamnasa, that separates the two provinces, at dawn on September 14th, 1952. The date was significant. He had just passed his 57th birthday. Not that he pays any attention to such things in the ordinary course of events. "We are all separate from our bodies," he has said, "just as the resident is separate from the house. We don't celebrate the birth of a house. We only make use of it. And we try to keep it neat and tidy. . . ." Yet, none the less, it is hard to believe that the date had no personal significance for him: that it was not to be a day of fresh dedication. The little group of Bihari workers waiting in the milky light to receive him on the far bank had no idea what was in his mind.

Bihar is India's poorest province. The northern area, which is well-watered, carries a population of some 800 humans to the acre. Here the soil gleams like chocolate, fish "fly-replete in depths of June" fatten contentedly in paddy fields which lie waist deep in water. But to the south the landscape changes. The subsoil is a layer of granite. To sink a single well through the granite costs £1,500—fifteen times as much as the cost of an ordinary shallow well. The soil has been eroded to a

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

sandy waste. Only cairns of gigantic stones, like the bones of hills from which the soil has long since shrivelled away, break the barren monotony of the plain. From March to the monsoons of midsummer the *loo* wind sets Bihar ablaze. It comes from the Rajput deserts, gathering heat and dust on the way, and it tears through the plains of south Bihar like a starving tiger stripping flesh from its helpless victim.

South Bihar is a one-crop land. Rice sown at the end of the monsoon is harvested in January. For the rest of the year most of the peasants have no livelihood; since wheat, millet, sugarcane and a second crop of rice are impossible without expensive irrigation. One crop a year means one meal a day. It may mean less. The rains may fail, or they may come too early or too late, or they may burst from the swollen rivers in dramatic and terrible floods. In Bihar the weather god is capricious to the point of cruelty. Perhaps he is punishing the Biharis for the state of utter exhaustion to which centuries of bad cultivation have reduced their soil. Even in an average year many families live for several months on onions and dried peppers in an effort to take away the taste of hunger; for their store of rice rarely lasts more than six months and they cannot afford to buy at off-season prices.

Vinoba had chosen Bihar for the next stage of his experiment for two reasons—one hard-headed and practical, the other mystical. He has a knack of successfully combining the two. With its overpopulation in the north and its poverty and stagnation in the south—combined with a general reputation for conservatism, slowness, unadaptability—Bihar was just about the most difficult practice-ground that he could find. It was also the land of the Buddha, who 2,500 years ago wandered from village to village: the first of the world's saints to preach the doctrine of non-violence.

The morning that he crossed the River Karamnasa Vinoba gently exploded a bombshell under the noses of his new hosts. He was not going to leave Bihar until he was assured that its land problem could be solved without him. For that they would

SAINT ON THE MARCH

need to collect 3 million acres—one-sixth of the province's total cultivable land—for redistribution among the landless. If together they proved that this could be achieved in the dramatically unsuitable conditions of Bihar, then he would have the courage to go to the rest of India and demand that they too help him to fulfil his pledge. Those who now said that *Bhoodan* could never work on a large enough scale would no longer have any excuse for holding back. As a first target, Vinoba intended to collect 300,000 acres in the district of Gaya in time for the conference in April, 1954. This figure was one-sixth of the cultivable total in Gaya, which, being in the middle of the province, combined overpopulation with barrenness. In the heart of Gaya district lies the small village of Bodh Gaya. A temple has been built here close to the very *bo* tree under which the Buddha is believed to have reached enlightenment. . . . The Buddha had once been unable to buy a parcel of land on which to found a monastery, even though he offered a heap of gold. Would Vinoba, with no money to offer, prove more successful?

The first answer seemed to be "No."

The landlords were suspicious. They had just lost a bitter and prolonged battle over the abolition of the *zamindari*, the system of tax-farming established by the British. The British had forgotten that Bihar was not the same as Sussex or Virginia, and had hoped to create a class of "landed gentry" with a vested interest in good farming. Instead, they had created a class of oppressive parasites, who, with the rent they paid to the Government fixed at an absurdly low sum, were not themselves restricted as to the revenue which they could reap from their own tenants when they had sublet the land. For a full century the *zamindari* had grown progressively fatter from the discrepancy between the two. No wonder they did not want the system changed. They had formed a powerful political party which lavished its funds on persuading the peasants to vote for them. When, in spite of their blockbusting tactics, abolition had been made law, the Bihar *zamindars*

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

had gone to the Indian Supreme Court on the grounds that the measure was contrary to a Constitution which guaranteed private property. The Supreme Court had conceded the point and the Indian Parliament had been obliged to modify the Constitution. Would such tough and determined proprietors prove amenable to "loving persuasion"?

In the first weeks, contributions in Bihar totalled no more than a few acres each day, although in the United Provinces the workers whom *Bhoodan* had left behind continued to receive amazing quantities. Every Bihari acre had to be prized loose with Vinoba's ceaseless diligence. On reaching a village Vinoba visited the landlords, accompanied, a trifle nervously, by the one who had rashly promised to act as host. Perhaps a group of them had already gathered to await him, their bristling black moustaches and shaved heads, with the strand of longer hair looped on top in orthodox Bihari fashion, giving them an appropriately pugnacious air.

"You want the peasantry to dictate to us it seems. We cannot allow it."

"I don't want anyone to dictate to anyone. I aim at peace and happiness in the villages. We can achieve it, too, if those who live in the village solve its land problem by love and mutual trust. . . ."

"Then we will give what we think we should give and in our own time. You cannot insist on us making over a share of one-sixth."

"I am asking for one-sixth as a matter of right—not charity. The poor are our sixth son; that is why they have a right to our possessions."

"The youngest son should learn to serve his parents."

"He has been expected to serve for a long time. Besides, his children are yours as well."

"Suppose we give them land—they will simply take it and walk off. Then they will go and work for another landlord. How do we benefit? But if we give a loan, the peasants respect us—even though they may not repay it."

SAINT ON THE MARCH

"I am not thinking of benefiting you in this work. At least not directly. There should be no question of coercion about gifts. But in a loan there is an element of coercion. If you are ready to give I am sure that the peasants will be grateful. People are grateful by nature."

"Gandhi devoted himself to others. Yet what happened in the end? Was he killed out of gratitude?"

"Then, if that is how you feel, leave things as they are; but don't imagine that the poor are content to leave things as they are too. If they continue in their present misery, you may not be let off as lightly as you seem to expect."

"But will they give us in writing that they will come and work for us if we make over land to them as gifts?"

"Why should they give any undertaking in writing? There is your wife standing by your side. When you married her, did you demand a written document to the effect that she would serve you? The main thing in a relationship is that it should be maintained by love, not by written documents. Suppose they give you a contract, will you also give them a similar paper promising always to engage them for work? . . . You say 'Yes' now, but supposing your son says to-morrow that he wants to cultivate his share of the land by himself? Then what will you do?"

"All right. We'll decide what we can give and let you know later."

"How much may the village expect?"

"We must think about it. Perhaps one-twentieth of our land. Not more."

"I leave it to you. If you think one-twentieth is enough to solve the land problem of the village I will not object to your giving no more than that. But if more is found to be necessary, then I should not accept that amount. I would wait until you felt ready to provide every one of the landless peasants with at least some small amount of land. With this in mind I would like you yourselves to decide how much is necessary and give accordingly."

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

Bihar's landlords were not the only people who were hostile to their visitor. At Deoghar he tried to visit the famous temple of Shiva in company with some of the local "untouchables." In the old days "untouchables" were not allowed to enter temples; their presence being considered an offence to sanctity. They had their own shrines outside the main gates where low-grade Brahmins officiated for them. This practice of segregated worship, similar in pattern and perhaps even in origin to the segregation practised by some American Churches (the "untouchables" of India clearly belong by feature to the Negroid Dravidians, the original inhabitants of the country who were conquered by the "Aryan" invaders), has now been forbidden under the Constitution of Free India. But, as Vinoba is never tired of pointing out, of what use is a law until those in a position to flout it are mentally prepared for the change?

As Vinoba and his small party silently approached the temple gates they were assaulted by a gang of angry priests. "I was meditating reverently on a hymn in praise of Shiva," Vinoba said, "so that when this sudden and unexpected assault started, I experienced a feeling of comfort. And those of my companions who were badly battered tell me that they too suffered no anger within them. Still in this happy state of mind, I turned back, but as we were going away our attackers became more zealous. My companions tried to cordon me off and shield me from the blows that were aimed directly at me. Yet just at the end of this sacrificial rite I also was not without my taste of it. I remembered how Mahatma Gandhi was subjected to a similar assault at this very place of pilgrimage. And I felt honoured to be blessed in the same way." The taste which Vinoba had so much enjoyed were certain stout whacks in the region of the left temple, on account of which he now suffers from deafness. He wears his deafness with childlike pride: it is his service medal.

At Vinoba's request, those responsible for the assault were not punished. They had acted out of ignorance, he said. They

SAINT ON THE MARCH

did not realise that he was their friend as well as the friend of the untouchables. If they were punished, that would merely harden them in their wrong-headedness and he would never be able to convince them that he was not their enemy.

It seemed in Bihar that there were a lot of people who needed convincing. He was vigilant for opportunities. He heard that the Landlords' Party was complaining about the unjust application of the new *Zamindari* Bill. Now that the *zamindars* were down it had become a popular sport to give them an extra kick in the pants as well. The police incited the peasants not to pay their rents to the *zamindars* who had still not been expropriated, so that these *zamindars* themselves did not have the money to pay their taxes to the Government. They were then persecuted by the police and, if they refused to give a fat enough bribe, taken to court, where they were heavily fined and sometimes even given a prison sentence.

Vinoba issued invitations to 600 leaders of the Landlords' Party in the different districts to come and discuss this persecution with him. Twenty rather suspiciously turned up, and Vinoba collected documentary evidence of their grievances. The landlords were not conciliatory: they did not trust Vinoba's motives for interfering. In a veiled way, they even accused *Bhoodan* of setting the people against them. Vinoba listened quietly. Then when they had left he approached the Chief Minister of Bihar and suggested that a regulation be introduced to make it clear that the peasants must continue to pay their dues to those landlords whose estates had not yet been bought up by the Government. The Chief Minister agreed. Police persecution stopped forthwith.

Out of gratitude, the Landlords' Party resolved to make a joint gift of 1,200 acres to *Bhoodan* and to depute a couple of members to accompany Vinoba on his travels so as to reinforce his appeal to their fellow landlords. Torrential rains had started: but "Wet or fine, the Ganges never stops, so why should I?" and while he splashed speedily through the mud, a landlord, holding in one hand a pair of refined and

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

elastic-sided pumps and in the other a black umbrella, clumsily clambered at his side. "On several occasions," Vinoba said with a look of slightly mischievous merriment at his wealthy companion, "we walked for three hours soaked to the skin. This encouraged us very much."

After the monsoon comes malaria. This is the time when for a few weeks even Bihar looks like a South Sea island laced with palm-fringed lagoons. Lilies, lotuses, purple water-hyacinths spread like an epidemic of beauty across the water-logged land. All things flourish—including the malarial mosquito, which loves water-lily leaves and the slimy and stagnant water that lies beneath them. On December 12th, Vinoba, always a chronic malaria subject, was struck by a virulent attack. He carried on in spite of his high temperature. Next morning he walked his usual twelve miles. But on the morning afterwards, when his temperature was 103° he allowed himself to be carried by bullock cart. Then on the 15th he discarded the bullock cart and walked again. But his condition was now critical. The strain he had undergone through refusing to stop work had seriously affected his heart.

They tried to persuade him to go to hospital. But he would not move from the tiny and desolate village of Chandil where he had collapsed. "Do not people also die in hospital?" he said. At first he would not take medicine either. His life was in God's hands. "He wants either to free me from all work or to purify me so that my body may be used again to greater purpose." President Prasad and Prime Minister Nehru pleaded with him to reconsider his decision. The Secretary of the All India Congress was sent to the tiny village to watch at the side of his wooden bed. His companions knelt at his feet imploring him not to leave them when there was still so much to do. After a week he gave way. "I am putting my friends and well-wishers to anxiety and strain. To be stubborn in such circumstances is itself a form of pride." When he took quinine, the fever lessened and his heart condition improved.

Since then Vinoba's attitude to medicine has changed. His

SAINT ON THE MARCH

illness seemed to prove, even to his own exacting conscience, that he was indifferent to death. And to-day, for the sake of his work, he represses chronic malaria with a regular dose of "Canoquin."

Something else happened with Vinoba's illness, too. Bihar began to respond. Workers flocked to join him, among them boys and girls scarcely in their teens: 200 converged on the key district of Gaya, where in the following months they were able to collect 100,000 acres. The Prince of Tekhari gave all he had, keeping only a few acres back to cultivate with his own hands. By the time of the Conference in March, 1953, at the village of Chandil, where Vinoba was still convalescing, Bihar had contributed 200,000 acres. Six weeks earlier her total after five months' work had been but a meagre 40,000. The sudden increase had come before Vinoba himself had stirred outside the village where he was convalescing. On the eve of the Conference, Bihar's largest landlord, the Rajah of Ramgarh, offered 100,000 acres, subject to the consent of the Government. Almost immediately the Rajah of Dhanbad surpassed him with 100,001 acres. The infection was spreading fast.

Three thousand delegates assembled in March, 1953, in Chandil. They came from all over India, paying their own passage and trekking the last miles on foot from the nearest railway station. Only a few months before it must have seemed as if the movement had met its Waterloo. Yet now its supporters were full of high confidence and hope.

The conference was held in open fields near a small river. Men, women and children slept in a confused jumble on straw, ate austere meals squatting on jute sacks, drank heavily chlorinated water pumped from the river, and fought a continual skirmish with dust, flies, ants and sunlight. Who minded such things? When Vinoba walked shakily on to the bamboo dais to address them, a great cry of "Victory to Saint Vinoba!" went up. He acknowledged it over folded palms, standing there bent and solemn for several minutes. Then as

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

the cry died down, there was a rustle of wraith-like figures propping the saint against a bolster and an absurd crackle and whoop as the microphone was moved nearer. Vinoba glanced round the white-clad crowd at his feet, some of them spinning, some cross-legged and bolt upright—all now silently bent towards him. From a distance the twinkle hardly showed in his eyes. He looked grave and withdrawn. Five years ago he had shrunk from being put at the head of a Gandhi cult. Yet here he was at the head of a Vinoba cult every bit as powerful. How much still remained before, even in their enthusiasm, his countrymen became self-reliant and mature. How much, too, in spite of the jubilation, *Bhoodan* still had to accomplish. They had collected 800,000 acres in two years. There was cause for thankfulness in that. But there was cause for reflection too. They had precisely one year left in which to reach their first target of $2\frac{1}{2}$ million. They would have to work six times as hard if they were to fulfil their vow. And that was only the beginning. It was not enough merely to divide the desert justly. It would have, as well, to "rejoice and blossom as the rose." How could he rest till that too was accomplished?

He spoke for close on two hours. He was as quiet as ever. But his very lucidity and calm hid the dynamite of controlled passion.

KEEPING UP WITH DADDY LONGLEGS

IT WAS IN April, 1954, a few days before the next annual conference of *Bhoodan* workers, that I joined Vinoba's party in order to carry on my quest. There was scarcely a week left before April 18th, the crucial date by which the 2½ million acres were supposed to be collected.

Monday, Gaya District, Bihar

My first day on the march with Vinoba.

Prayers started outside his hut at 3.30 a.m. How I enjoyed listening to them from bed (or, rather, from a cotton blanket and a mound of straw), still floating in from the twilit bar of sleep. Deliberately breaking a good resolution is one of life's little luxuries. At 4.20 Vinoba suddenly sweeps out of the darkness carrying a storm lantern and I have to take up my bed and run. (Christ's injunction no longer seems slightly comic. I imagine the Jews in ancient Palestine, like us to-day, spread no more than a couple of blankets on the floor.) I have always heard about Vinoba's fast walk, but I don't think I expected it to be quite *so* fast.

Although only 5 feet 6 inches tall, his legs are long compared to the rest of his body. They are set rather wide, like a woman's. But there is nothing feminine about his gait. He moves from the hips, keeping the rest of his body bolt upright and the arms stiff at his side. His pace is military in its precision. How different from Gandhi's casual and friendly plod with arms round his "human walking-sticks."

I am told to expect strict silence until five o'clock, and precisely on the stroke, without even a glance at a watch, Vinoba stops dead in his tracks and holds a white handkerchief straight

KEEPING UP WITH DADDY LONGLEGS

above his head. I am reminded of a crocodile led from church by a Victorian schoolmaster, and allowed, after a disciplinary half-hour, to unbutton its Sunday faces. We schoolboys break into a little desultory, awed chatter and a few nervous giggles. Several walk over to the ditch on the side of the road and expectorate carefully (and that in India, where one is likely to have a stream of unprepossessing liquid discharged at one's feet, shows a high degree of training).

Soon dawn is coming up. The golden hem round the dark and velvety night sky expands. A few tattered flags of mist unfurl themselves and float upwards streaked with scarlet. The first vibrations of light are as soft and silvery as a lisp of cymbals. Then there is a roll on the big drums, a shattering blast on the tubas, and the sun is there—a gigantic gong hoisted above the rim of the earth. Dawn in India is a reeling race of sensations. Trees rush at you out of the darkness. Birds start to chatter at once. Pic-dog puppies, appearing from nowhere, dance at our heels in a state of hysterical glee. Then it is over. The ten-minute orgy of a world condemned to death. The sun is risen and binds us with burning brass.

Vinoba does not notice. He drives on with his rhythmical, relentless stride. Writing about it, I feel like one of those despairing commentators on a long-distance marathon in which the favourite, as expected, hopelessly outclasses his field, leaving the commentator struggling to invest the inevitable with at least some appearance of excitement. "Now right there—up alongside of him now——" Once at the start of his tour in the United Provinces there was a group of noisy students nudging Vinoba, treading on his heels. He warned them to be quieter, more disciplined. They seemed to find it hard. So he changed into top gear and drew effortlessly clear, leaving them straggling, abashed and silent behind.

This morning it is the women who challenge him first, forming a little chirruping cluster on either side. Why is it that women all through the ages have had a vested interest in

SAINT ON THE MARCH

saints? Perhaps they instinctively see the saint as a child, and, putting themselves in the place of his mother, have the courage to show affection and not merely awe. While men, more inhibited, venerate with a cynical margin of safety from afar. No; that's not it. For there is no awe, no breathless and bated hush in the vicinity of Vinoba. Only delighted affection—typified by the fact that I already think of him as “Daddy Longlegs.” Women, perhaps, merely find such affection easier to express.

We are heading for the village of M. This is Vinoba's third tour through Gaya District, where the total collected stands at 150,000 acres—half of that pledged to be collected in time for the next conference.

“There were rain-drops during the prayer meeting last night and again this morning. Did you notice?”

“Oh what a pity,” I mumble, ashamed now of having still been in bed.

“No; not a pity. Rain is considered auspicious at such moments. God is blessing *Baba*.” I glance at my companion. He is about seventeen, but would look much younger if he was not making a hopeful attempt at a beard. I notice that he referred to Vinoba as *Baba*—father—and that he is gazing ahead of him with a bright, happy expression like a Christmas Child.

A bus approaches down the dusty road. It is brought to a standstill by a group of vultures gorging so intently on a carcass just ahead that prolonged peals on a raucous hooter scarcely make them wince. We dive headlong for the field, and, while the bus passes, press towels over averted faces as if expressing our profound contempt for this symbol of the machine age (like most Indian buses, a pretty derelict symbol, acquired perhaps from the Doncaster Corporation twenty-five years ago). Our gesture seems a trifle exaggerated and I emerge more quickly than the others, only to find myself choked by the thick cream of dust which the vehicle has churned in its wake.

KEEPING UP WITH DADDY LONGLEGS

By this time I am beginning to feel footsore and my open sandals, held merely by a thong of leather over the big toe, are rubbing me in unexpected places. Eight years ago I was used to wearing such things every day of my life and I suppose it was a little naïve to imagine that I should still have the knack. I regret not having packed a variety of shoes, corn-plaster, thick, shock-absorber socks. Then the same moment I feel the weight of my luggage (a plastic bag with the cotton blanket untidily forced on top so that the zip is already splitting) and decide that, weakling as I am, I could not possibly have walked with more than this through the April heat. Besides, any moment now the *loo* will be starting. Inspiration ebbs. I foresee a squalid struggle against discomfort.

Few Europeans have braved the rigours of *Bhoodan* (though I am told there is an American girl, Pat, who has been with it for over a year) and the others watch me with nervous sympathy. I fix a determined smile on my face, hoping, as the blisters worsen, that it does not turn into a grimace of agony. It probably does, for my little companion is soon trying to snatch my bag out of my grasp. "Look—I am needing nothing. Just this small bundle. You must let me carry for you. You are guest. We in India must treat our guests as if they were God." I resist, saying that I have lived for years in an Indian village and dislike being treated as God. Then I readjust my grin, forcing it through clenched teeth. At last at 6.40 we see a flurry of staves and flags in the distance (for we stragglers have fallen half a mile behind). It looks like a skirmish of guerrillas, but isn't. It is merely the villagers of M. greeting their guest. There are shouts of "Victory to Saint Vinoba!" We have arrived.

The village is poor. Which Indian village isn't? But this is particularly poor, since its landlords live in Gaya town and none of the cultivators feels worthy or rich enough to house us. So they have banded together and cleared out the old *dak* bungalow. These Government buildings—*dak* means mail—are the most widespread monuments left by the British

SAINT ON THE MARCH

Raj. They are reserved for visiting officials. Ours has two small rooms. Vinoba, his secretary and Mahadevi Thai, his nurse, acolyte and adopted daughter, take one room and the rest of us crowd the other and the veranda outside.

The bungalow is empty except for a yellowing slip of paper recording some ancient shooting expedition successfully prosecuted by the late rulers and still pinned to the wall. Then overhead—another relic of the Imperial past—two cloth fans, once pulled backwards and forwards by a full-time *punkab-wallah* for a few annas a day, now hanging forlorn and moth-eaten like great trussed birds. Seeing us sweat profusely, one of the villagers brooding over our comfort from the doorway, rushed forward to put the fans into operation. But he is restrained. A little wistfully I recall the electric fans of Delhi and Bombay. Electricity is as remote here as the rush torches used in medieval processions would seem in London or New York. I borrow a dry palm-leaf. But the effort required to rotate it makes me sweat more.

None of us except Vinoba seems to do much in M. Vinoba talks in a ceaseless murmur next door to the villagers. In the afternoon he dictates letters—one apparently to a Rajah who, when he made his gift of 100,000 acres, promised at the same time to walk with Vinoba and to try to persuade his fellows to an equal generosity. So far he has shown no signs of fulfilling his promise and is being gently reminded of it. Yet in spite of our torpid day the land rolls in—several hundred acres of it. But not from M. itself.

M., I am told by Damodar Das, Vinoba's secretary (ugly, aggressively good-natured face, voice like a bronchitic raven), has already given enough to solve its immediate problems. That happened a month or two back when Damodar, on his way somewhere else, got off the bus to take a drink of water. The village's largest landlord was standing by the pump. "I suppose you have come for more land," said the landlord, who recognised him.

KEEPING UP WITH DADDY LONGLEGS

Damodar blinked behind his huge spectacles, but didn't give the game away. "Why, are you ready to give more?" he asked.

"Well, I've been thinking. If I give my labourers a share of the crop, why shouldn't I give them a share of the land instead?"

"Are all the labourers here working as share-croppers?"

"Yes. I think so."

"And would the other landlords be prepared to do the same?"

"We could discuss it with them and see." They did. The result was that, although Damodar lost the bus, he obtained $\frac{1}{2}$ acre each for the landless.

This afternoon Vinoba had interviewed the landlords again. Let them not think, because they have all given land, that they are owed some peculiar reverence by society. What they had done was only a first step. During the next five years they should train themselves and their children to farm with their own hands. Then at the end of that time he would come back and loot them further, till they retained no more land than they themselves could farm. The landlords took it all meekly.

We eat—surprisingly well—off lotus leaves instead of plates. Perfectly round and purple-green, they have a delicate tracery of vein and stem. A better shape than the usual emerald banana leaf, but somehow not so appetising in colour. How sensible and uncluttered this village life can be. We rinse our hands at the well before and after meals—so much for the cutlery. And as for the crockery—we just throw the leaves and food remains in a pit and leave the jackals and pie-dogs to polish it up. It sounds dirty, but it isn't. In fact, the cleanliness of Indian villages is startling. Cartons, newspapers, tins—these things just don't enter the village and so don't get thrown about.

We have a jeep! It is used when the tour is on motorable roads and evidently dates from the days of U.S. Air Force bases nine years back. They say it never goes wrong; looking at it, I imagine it held together by hypnotism. It is used for

SAINT ON THE MARCH

carrying the microphone and office equipment. The microphone, as I see in the evening prayer meeting, is an important weapon in Vinoba's armoury of love. It allows him to address his public meetings in no more than a whisper, which dramatises the impression of gentleness. Not that he calculates about such things, of course. Nobody could be less conscious of "impressions." It is just an example of how his inner harmony instinctively finds the right style in which to express itself.

I've kept careful watch on his food to-day. Three little brass bowls of liquid curds and a glass or two of fresh lemon-juice, both sweetened with *gur*—natural molasses tapped from palm. He only takes fluids. No grain or spice in any form—and, of course, like millions of other Hindus, no fish, flesh, fowl or eggs. Gandhi insisted on nuts, honey, parboiled vegetables, and other "simple" fare not often found in villages, but Vinoba's diet is even more simple and would be obtainable anywhere in the whole sub-continent. It costs about two shillings a day—though, of course, the villagers give us everything free. He does not eat with us, but sitting bolt upright on his wooden bunk while continuing to listen to village visitors. Before swallowing, he swills the curds eight times round his mouth, a process of pre-digestion not so tedious as Mr. Gladstone's, since he eats a quantity just about sufficient for a ten-month-old baby. Another reason why that microphone is important, perhaps. It saves energy. On such a diet and doing all he does, Vinoba has to restrict himself somewhere.

I don't seem to have got very far in sorting out the entourage. The most determined and chirrupy of the girl followers, a pig-tailed tomboy who manages to look chic in homespun and has a squint and squirms when she giggles (which is often), is Sumitra, Gandhi's granddaughter. The only person with whom I have any sustained conversation is one of those amorphous Indian characters who, sheltering in the shadow of saints, carry the dreams of adolescence quietly into middle age. Glad of another odd man out, I fell into anonymous conversation after dark. He has been at Vinoba's *Ashram* for thirty years—

KEEPING UP WITH DADDY LONGLEGS

since boyhood. He is here for a few days not on *Bhoodan* work—that would be much too down to earth for him—but to discuss the selections from Shankacharya (the Hindu Aquinas) which he is preparing with Vinoba's guidance and blessing. He was eloquent about Vinoba's scholastic attainments, but deplored the fact that he made so little use of them for the benefit of others. When in jail under the British in 1932, Vinoba had regaled his fellow prisoners with lectures, because digging and weaving, his normal occupations, were not possible. He chose as his subject his beloved *Gita*—the song of God delivered by Krishna, whom Hindus consider the chief incarnation of the Divine. The *Gita* preaches devotion to a personal God and places the path of sacrificial activity above that of meditation. Vinoba's lectures had been published—but not by himself. He merely edited the efforts of someone in the audience who had taken notes of his lectures. "One of the sweetest commentaries of the age" was how my informant described them. They had been a best-seller.

I asked him whether, as someone who had known Vinoba all these years, he could see much change in him now. "We members of his *Ashram*," he said, "always knew that he could cry. In the old days he used to be in tears when he read us some moving passage from scripture. But he withdrew himself from strangers. Now he cries for people and not for books, so that the world too might be knowing his heart of love."

"Why was he so timid with strangers?"

"He was not ready for them. He did not want to spread himself too thinly until he had something big inside him to spread. Do you know what he said last year at Chandil? 'If Gandhi had not died, how could I ever have dared to come forward?'"

"Yes; but he also said something else." I remembered it, for it was probably the only time Vinoba had used an English phrase in public and certainly the only time that he had quoted Shakespeare: "There is a tide in the affairs of men". Surely that was an acknowledgement of inner change?"

SAINT ON THE MARCH

"India needed him," my friend replied simply. "God told him that the time for timidity had passed."

Tuesday: Gaya District, Bihar

My attempt to pack luggage secretly in the jeep nearly proves disastrous. We walk quickly off the road and I am told that the luggage is being brought by bullock cart and that the jeep is going back to Gaya. However, miraculously, my luggage appears—on the bullock cart. Learn later that, bird-like and vigilant, Sumitra had spotted it before we left and transferred it herself. Silently I took a vow to observe the rules in future and not to make use of the office transport for personal effects.

Walking barefoot across the cracked stubble fields (my blisters are too bad to support any kind of footwear this morning), I fall further behind than ever. By the time I arrive here—a village of baked clay and cow-dung—the *loo* is in full blast and I am thoroughly sorry for myself. We are housed in what appears to be a small and dilapidated cowshed on the veranda of a building that was once the *Zamindar's* court for the trial of obstreperous tenants and the exaction of fines and taxes. Vinoba and the ladies are in the courtyard inside—more sheltered than we are from humans, but rather less from sun, for we at least have a hank or two of straw over our heads. I am at the end, where the shed adjoins the village well. Three buckets in constant operation and drawn up on ropes of plaited straw irrigate some fields of onions, pumpkins and lentils down at the bottom of the slope. The buckets are operated by hand throughout the day, and when I rest I imagine myself lying out to sea on a rock with the slap and trickle of the triple pump swishing the water past my head.

The whole village—including goats, buffaloes, cows and some very ancient crones with breasts like dried figs—gathers round the well for their daily ablutions. My own bath attracts the frankest and most public interest. Can I manage it without betraying my modesty? Indian villagers can, since they are

KEEPING UP WITH DADDY LONGLEGS

practised from childhood. They are also extremely squeamish, and any slip is considered a sign of ill breeding. It is not easy in trousers, and watching my companions wash with their *dhobies* still wrapped round their loins and then wind themselves in the *dhobi* that they washed yesterday while effortlessly shaking the dirty one from underneath once more emphasises that the simplicity of Indian village life is far from primitive or crude. On the contrary, in India the simpler the life the more refined it is. Simplicity is the hall-mark of a civilisation based for thousands of years on villages and agriculture—a civilisation that never knew the city-states of Greece nor the urban virtues first developed in Europe in the Middle Ages through craft guilds, corporations and merchant leagues. It is not insignificant that both Vinoba and Gandhi in their attempt to irradiate the new India with the virtues of the Indian past are so stubbornly insistent that she should retain her village civilisation and use industrial techniques only in so far as they serve the village pattern and do not dominate it.

Villagers dish up a lunch of *chapattis*—thin, round dough-cakes like rags of leather—gritty rice and a small portion of curried potatoes. By their off-season standard this is obviously a feast. I feel queasy. The *loo* has made tongue, eyes, throat and nose parched and dry. Little eddies of red-hot dust needle into me continuously like gnats. As I get hotter and more feverish, my interest in *Bhoodan* perceptibly cools. The thirst for the water of the spirit is replaced by an unquenchable passion for lime-juice. I fill my thermos from the well, imagine that I see it swarming with germs—just as a man with the D.Ts. imagines beetles—then, braving my disgust, swallow three mugfuls in quick succession. I become convinced that I am on the edge of a fatal disease.

Sumitra, who seems to notice everything, has seen that I hardly ate any lunch, and comes to enquire why. Magically, she has a secret store of limes and is soon rushing round preparing an elaborate *sherbet* which she maintains will cure a

SAINT ON THE MARCH

thousand ills. The preparation takes half an hour and the clinking and stirring of spoons is heard all over the *Zamindar's* court as, discharging a dozen other duties as well, she threads her way erratic as a butterfly through the rest of us, who lie like squashed caterpillars in the heat.

What an extraordinary girl! This morning she went hammer and tongs at *Baba*, attacking him for supporting the division of India into linguistic provinces. It was like a sparrow teasing a shaggy but amiable St. Bernard. Although quite obviously bursting with buoyancy and high spirits, she protests that she finds every moment of her life here wearisome and distasteful. "What on earth am I doing in this village so far away from home? What on earth?" And she sinks down, *sari* pressed over her mouth, eyes suddenly grave and liquid. As she has just been embarrassingly frank about her physical condition (her grandfather was equally outspoken on the question of his nether regions), one expects the flurry of tears common with women at such a time. But not a bit of it. "Oh, I know—I promised to translate *Baba's* last speech into English." And she is up again before she has reached a sitting position.

She is tremendously proud of her English, which she speaks in a racy, monotonous chirrup like a grasshopper. She begs you to correct her mistakes and is as excited as a child when you say, truthfully, that there aren't any. What she really wants to do is to go to England and study social science. And, as she says it, she looks at you defiantly from behind her squint, daring you to remind her that she is not living up to her grandfather's ideals. Sumitra is a rebel. "My obstinate kitten," Gandhi called her. She inherited this obstinacy from him, but she uses it to assert herself against the great shadow thrown over her from the past. I sympathise, also having suffered from ancestor trouble. Not that she didn't love her grandfather. She did passionately. But without any awed reverence—which is a measure of his amazing humanity. She says she could never imagine having the same boisterous affection for Vinoba. He somehow makes you feel—well,

KEEPING UP WITH DADDY LONGLEGS

quiet. And she is not sure—wrinkling her nose—that she likes being quiet.

The cure started by Sumitra's limes is completed by the evening prayer-meeting. We are under a huge *pepul* tree—fierce sun filtered by the foliage. The whole village turns out to join us, sitting round in pin-drop silence on the burnt grass. The babies are in discoloured little blouses, their distended, malarial bellies decked with a few trinkets. The little girls over five have been put into *saris* for the occasion, but even these are already ragged with washing. At the back the village women wear their *saris* pulled right over their faces like deep-sea divers in an oxygen mask. In the front row sits a father clutching a child on either arm with fierce tenderness. The kids' eyes are turned towards the platform. But they are sightless; a grey, opaque mess of trachoma.

Looking round, I am near to tears. If only some of the more smug members of the China Lobby could feel the impenetrable sadness of this crowd, perhaps they would talk more sense about Asia. Yet it is not only tears that one feels. Under all the misery and degradation an underlying nobility shows through. It is not the myth of the noble savage. Just the opposite, in fact—for the Indian villager has been removed from a state of savagery for far longer than we have. Perhaps that is the secret of what I feel: here, after thousands of years of poverty, a culture still lives and is capable of response, unique and vital, to the challenge of the modern world.

Mahadevi Thai always leads the prayers. She is a thirty-five-year-old child-widow who has spent all her adult life in attendance on Vinoba; 60 per cent. of India's social workers are drawn from this class, for re-marriage, now permissible by law, is seldom practised. She recites the names of God tonelessly and too near the microphone, her face rapt and bony. The crowd listens, but takes no notice when she urges them to join in by clapping their hands in time to the recitation. When Vinoba speaks, their expressions remain equally blank and stunned.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

"You are the real heroes of India," he says as he looks round. "You who live in the small villages, in the midst of disease and pest and drought and poverty. The great ones may forget you. Yet you do not complain. Perhaps that shows how much more God loves you than He loves the great." It is a speech of extraordinary compassion. Do they understand it? Not fully, perhaps. And yet something comes across. They give him a direct and simple reverence. If Christ or St. Francis came to-day to the slums of Harlem and Liverpool, would we have time to listen? Probably not. We get the leaders we deserve—in realms of the spirit just as in politics. Showy Salvationism seems to be the limit of the spiritual capacity of the modern West. Perhaps the villagers of India, though sunk in unimaginable poverty, are not as spiritually dispossessed as we. "Our salvation lies in performance of bodily labour and in freedom from the lure of money," says Vinoba. Who but the poor and powerless are ready to listen to such a message? After all, there are precedents. God once spoke through captive Jews rather than powerful Romans.

After the meeting, publications are put on sale, though I understand that the village is entirely illiterate. None buy except two boys, who each lay out a precious anna. Damodar tells me this is unusual: normally, in spite of illiteracy, many buy.

I drag my cotton blanket into the courtyard where Vinoba is sleeping. Its pounded earth has grown chipped and uneven with the years. The best and most comfortable site is over by the drain, where I find a hummock of hard mud to act as a pillow. Stars rinse the air with a shimmering light. After my first interview with Vinoba three days ago I feel no desire whatever to press my presence on him again or pester him with questions. Yet I don't want to leave him either; travelling round with a begging bowl like a vagabond friar seems to suit me fine. Normally I am cursed with insomnia, but here stars, discomfort and tranquillity prove a better soporific than any night-cap of pink pills. After ten minutes I fall soundly asleep and wake, rested, with Vinoba's alarm at 3 a.m.

EIGHT

PIE-DOGS AND PHARISEES

Wednesday: Gaya District, Bihar

VINOBA CAUGHT US OUT this morning. At 4 a.m. we were all grouped round the door when he shot out—early because the next halt was fourteen miles away. We were thrown into confusion and started an ugly jockey for positions. Suddenly, after a couple of fields, he pulled up short with an imperious wave of the white handkerchief, and we all knocked breathlessly against one another in our effort not to tread on his heels. Nothing was said, but it was a lesson in discipline. Some seconds later we started off quietly and not a little abashed.

We are staying in a town of 13,000 inhabitants. It is on the far side of a tragic monsoon river which for three months is a torrent of life-giving waters, but for the other nine as dry as the Arizona desert, and which is spanned by a mile-long bridge. At the far end a Mayoral reception awaits us: banners, triumphal arches and flowers. By dint of extraordinary exertion, I am in at the kill, dripping with sweat and loaded by the enthusiastic populace with garlands. Vinoba has passed back his as soon as they are given him, but, not being a saint, I feel any refusal on my part would be misunderstood. An enormous crowd follows us to the chief landlord's house, where we are to stay. Vinoba is put in a high-backed wicker chair like a Victorian commodore. Mahadevi Thai washes his feet. School-children raise depressingly mechanical cheers and there is a solid chunk of Mayoral speechmaking (time, 6.15 a.m.).

The house is one of those proliferating joint family affairs.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

an expression of the syncretic Hindu mind that favours agglomeration rather than controlled design. It drops pillars, like concrete suckers, over half an acre; between them elaborate tendrils of iron tracery. The family itself is not so grotesque as this labyrinth of iron and concrete, but it is every bit as complicated. The fathers were five, and their wives came from the same caste group and were closely related. The twenty children, all now grown up, had not till their late adolescence realised who was the full brother or sister of whom. The system, however, has been modified with the new generation. It is no longer patriarchal—depending entirely on the eldest family member—but co-operative. Each of the earning members is responsible for a certain part of the expense; thus the two who run the estate meet the food and clothing needs of the whole family, their cousin, who operates a hardware store in the town, finances household repairs, and another cousin buys household equipment from his lawyer's fees, and so on. If any extra money is needed for schooling or a journey abroad, the earners must consult together and make a grant. It runs, so the third of the eight cousin-brothers still living at home informs me, as sweetly as a stream before the rains have muddied it. The advantages of the joint family, if it is maintained by love, are obvious. The ill, the elderly and the crippled need not live in dread of being discarded, the wife, left to mind the baby and clean the house, never lacks companionship. But woe to the joint family once jealousy enters. Intrigues, enclaves, stratagems of power inevitably follow. They become miniature Kremlins.

Krishna, the third son, who with the eighth was responsible for the estate—in India there is a term for every gradation of brother, cousin, aunt, uncle for which English has no equivalent; it shows where the centre of Indian interest lies—told me that he was not as keen on *Bhoodan* as his junior partner, who had tried to insist on the family yielding yet another share of its land. A good landlord who took an interest in his land could make much more of it than toddy-drinking peasants

PIE-DOGS AND PHARISEES

unused to responsibility or planning. Besides, *their* cultivators didn't want land and had been embarrassed by what had been given them so far. They had a very strict notion of how a landlord ought to behave: they disliked it if he wore anything but a fine-spun *dhoti* and protested vigorously when he tried to carry baggage or wield a spade. In return, the good landlord should meet all his cultivators' expenses—weddings, festivals, funerals. A parental relationship again, and fine if maintained by love, but in a country where social pressure in such matters has yet to be developed the landlord has many temptations to abuse his authority. Too often he withholds his cultivators' share of the crop, mulcts them for fines or treats them as mere instruments of profit.

Scratch most Indians these days and you get a bilious anti-Government grouse. Krishna was no exception. Why had second brother—back from studies in England—not got the promotion he deserved? Because, "they," his immediate superiors, were all Brahmins and had promoted one of *their* caste fellows (caste appointments are really a form of nepotism with the caste as an extended joint family). Why would they not do anything towards building a barrage across the monsoon river—the tragic trough of desert that we had crossed this morning? Because it would ruin some political bigwig's land, and he had bribed "them" to desist. (I learnt later that the Government had in fact offered a 50 per cent. grant to the local Public Works Department if they could raise the rest of the capital from local subscribers, but they couldn't.) Losing that first reserve which one wears for a foreigner like a best suit, Krishna became more bitter. Yet this youth, with his three days' growth of beard, alcoholic eye and the warped idealism of someone twice his age, vowed to Vinoba after prayers that evening that he would devote six months of every year to touring Gaya District with a *Bhoodan* party persuading his fellow landlords to give land. His eyes regained their sparkle as he spoke. What had brought about this change?

Of course, there are a great many *Bhoodan* conversions which

SAINT ON THE MARCH

are more nominal than real: people who give in order not to lose face, or from mere charity rather than sympathy with the purpose and spirit which Vinoba is trying to foster; people who fear their labourers' discontent if they do not give. Even *zamindars* (for such has been the case) who, after getting rid of their bad lands on *Bhoodan*, proceed to evict the tenants from their good, arranging for them to be given *Bhoodan* in exchange. But I do not believe Krishna's conversion belonged to any of the latter types. And juniors don't worry about losing face. Why is it, then, that Vinoba makes such an impact?

Something he said this evening when I had a half-hour with him may provide a clue. He spent the afternoon lecturing on the reform of the Hindi script and alphabet in one of the innumerable inner courtyards (he even has time for that), during which he gave a delicious parody of the stern school-master, making the *pardah* ladies repeat by rote what he had said and frowning very threateningly from behind the blackboard when they failed. The crowd was enormous and, although half of them could scarcely have understood what he was talking about, they applauded and laughed as if watching some famed and beloved figure taking part in amateur dramatics. I understood—with my two words of Hindi—even less than the others. But I had been promised an interview and was sticking around tenaciously in spite of the intense heat. Afterwards I sat at his feet with the audience still watching us, apparently in the belief that our talk had something to do with alphabet reform. I asked Vinoba whether he felt the attraction for the personality of Jesus felt by Gandhi, and he replied: "Christ was love personified, no doubt," (I quote his English *verbatim*, but cannot convey the querulous charm with which he spoke it, like a very elderly and very gentle professor of mathematics), "but I have no tendency to regard Him as perfection. We Hindus cannot attach ourselves in any exclusive way to the personality of one man. When we shout, 'Victory to Mahatma Gandhi——'"

"Or 'Victory to Saint Vinoba!'" I put in.

PIE-DOGS AND PHARISEES

Vinoba took no direct notice of the interruption: "It is all hysteria. We have never suffered from this hero-worship before. In this embodied life no human will ever attain to complete perfection, though to reach this perfection must indeed be the ideal that lures us ever forwards. Even Christ uttered 'woe' on the Pharisees and, according to Matthew, whipped the money-changers from the Temple. And cannot we criticise Him for it? Cannot we see that such conduct was more likely to turn the Pharisees and money-changers into continued enemies rather than convert them? Such an attitude may make people obstinate as well as wicked. Were *all* the Pharisees hypocrites and liars?"

The "woe" passages were the forerunner of St. Paul's diatribes against the Jews. Out of this grew centuries of persecution and heresy-hunting. And what has happened? Were the Jews converted as a result of Christian scorn and wrath? Of course not. They became proud and angry and rooted in hostility to Christ. Vinoba's words illuminated something which had long been an enigma to me—the sociological reason for the "rejection." Might it not have been due as much to the failure of the early Christians in their face-to-face contacts with those who had once been their co-religionists as to Jewish obstinacy? But Vinoba's words also clarified his own methods of converting others.

He has said: "I shall praise people; never denounce or say harsh things against them. Everyone has his great qualities. They need to be discovered and appreciated." But there is no trace of sentimentality about Vinoba's attitude. He is not like certain pacifists of the West who suspect the worst of those they know, but are convinced that the motives of the unknown "enemy" are tragically misunderstood. Vinoba sees the whole man, but he picks out for preference that which tends towards good. It is a conscious and rational choice. We all know what happens to the average person when he is trusted by a man he respects. He does his level best to prove worthy of the trust. Imagine the effect of being trusted by someone whom you and

SAINT ON THE MARCH

others reverence as a saint. Is not a saint's smile well worth a dozen acres?

Vinoba does not bind people to him personally, as Gandhi did. He points to the mountains, turning the onlooker's gaze away from himself. He is like the angels in certain medieval frescoes who, while indicating to the Apostle by their side the apocalyptic vision painted on the roof above, themselves stand with downcast and averted eyes. Mere signposts, utterly dedicated to the message that they have been chosen to give. That evening Krishna was not converted to *Bhoodan* because of any personal attraction exercised by Vinoba. The dedication which Vinoba personified had become a symbol of Krishna's own cowardice in the face of circumstance. The fault, dear Krishna, lies in ourselves. Destiny comes out of us, not at us. Krishna's eyes had been turned within and he had seen that, instead of being enslaved by Destiny, as he had imagined, he was enslaved by self.

There's a fearful flap going on. The District Secretary of *Bhoodan* for Gaya has come back with the jeep. There has been some muddle over the total collected in the district, which has to be sorted out before the conference. She and Sumitra and Gopi Sen (the secretary of our particular party) and Damodar Das (Vinoba's secretary) have the gift deeds piled all along the veranda in little heaps—in an Indian office one need never worry for table space! Damodar is hopping about between heaps like a startled raven. Someone called him Hanuman yesterday—Hanuman was the monkey who ran errands for Rama, the legendary Hindu hero. Rather touching and accurate. He is the devoted slave who, through this devotion, has a daily beauty in his life that cancels ugliness. How many when this beauty is withdrawn will avoid lapsing back into mediocrity? It is not from his devoted companions that we must look for a saint's successor. Vinoba lived apart from Gandhi, not under his wing. To-day many of those apparently closer to the old man in his lifetime have fallen by the wayside.

PIE-DOGS AND PHARISEES

Christ chose, not His more faithful and docile disciples, but impulsive and rebellious Peter.

It seems that it is not only the Gaya District total that has got into a muddle. No one knows the all-India total either. Some say that the target of $2\frac{1}{2}$ millions has already been surpassed, others that it is on the point of being so, yet others that the target is still a long way off. Having become a national movement almost by accident, no one seems to have thought of setting up a coherent national organisation. The statistics are still handled in far-off Sevagram, and yet each individual gift being made out in Vinoba's name—though it may come from the tip of the peninsula, where he has never been—has to be personally communicated to him. An odd mixture of faith, fervour and incompetence, and the sort of arrangement that could only be maintained by the enthusiastic amateur. Vinoba mistrusts organisations; he believes they become mere instruments of majority rule. "People start institutions which in the end overpower their founder. . . . The founders have not the courage to accept disillusion. . . ." But he also believes in efficiency. I must find out how he thinks the two beliefs can be reconciled. This would hardly be a tactful moment, though. He is reported to be seriously displeased. And even Sumitra is talking in an abashed whisper, as if not wanting to emphasise the confusion visible on the veranda. But the tactless and scorching glare of pressure-lamps makes it all too plain. . . .

Thursday: Gaya District, Bihar

When I drew level with Vinoba this morning in the hope of talking during the walk, he indicated in Hindustani that he was tired. But in a few minutes he was deep in conversation with a local worker who had just joined us. I had always heard that he did not like to speak English in public, and this confirmed it. At first I wondered whether there could be an element of prejudice in it, but it's more likely, I think, one of the last remaining traces of his once-famous timidity. He has met very

SAINT ON THE MARCH

few English-speaking people and lacks confidence in his use of the language, although in fact he speaks it almost faultlessly. He likes to talk English intimately, face to face. He cannot do this on his walks. He walks straight, never looking to left or right at the person he is talking to, and the strain of using English in this way, particularly with his deafness, would be an interruption, an infringement of discipline.

In fact, he loves languages: to him they speak not of the division, but of the unity of men, showing him the infinite ways our ingenuity has found of saying the same thing. Give him a French-English dictionary and he can browse through it by the hour with as much passion as if it contained the works of Shakespeare, Pascal, Victor Hugo and Wordsworth all rolled into one (he has read and relished all four of these authors in their original tongues).

The main road, which we are walking on again, is lined with *neem* trees smelling very sweet as the early morning sun inhales their sap. Parroquets peer at us cheekily through the leaves. We arrive at a village where the Socialist Party has done a great deal of work. It has been visited by Jai Prakash Narayan, the Socialist leader, who is now on tour for *Bhoodan*. The result is that many of the villagers wear the Indian Socialist cap—a “Gandhi” cap made of coarse homespun inadequately dipped in red ink. The condition of the village is very miserable, but owing to political consciousness it is in a high state of agitation, and for Vinoba it is one continuous session throughout the day with groups of villagers, while the rest of the inhabitants crouch silently round, listening to all that is said. He is told that 90 per cent. of the village is owned by absentee landlords, who live in Gaya, and that the one family that has given land to *Bhoodan* is the landlord with whom we are staying—the only landlord who lives in the village, in fact. Vinoba promises to visit the absentee landlords individually and persuade them to join the movement.

“You won’t succeed,” say the villagers.

“I am sure I will. But if I don’t we must think of something

PIE-DOGS AND PHARISEES

else. Would you have the courage to refuse to cultivate their lands?"

"They would hire other labour to work in our place. And then how would we eat?"

"There are no villages nearer than three to four miles. I don't believe the landlords would be able to persuade labourers to come so far."

"Then they would beat us up and force us to work for them."

"Not if you had courage and stood your ground."

"They will hate us and treat us worse than ever."

"Not if you show no hatred to them. We must explain that you do not want all their land. That you want to live in peace and prosperity with them, and that you can do this if you work together. They will respect you. They will say: 'These men are true children of God. They certainly deserve to have land of their own.'"

Previously Vinoba has always refused to discuss the possibility of this next step. "If I have to nurse a sick person, it would not be right for me simultaneously to plan his cremation. If, however, he dies, I should accept the fact peacefully and proceed to make arrangements for his funeral. Does not our worry about whether the landlords will give enough land through the method of peaceful persuasion betray a lack of faith in the landlords? Such a worry is suitable to a politician, but not to a man of faith." To-day I realised that Vinoba had long been fully aware of all the steps that were open to him, but had refrained from discussing them so that no taint of coercion should damage his relations with the rich. Such clear-headed restraint is surely heroic. It gives new meaning to Christ's "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" an injunction which has surely never before been made part of a reformer's programme! But when to-morrow comes it will be found that at a level deeper than conscious thought Vinoba has duly "taken heed."

We were inside a wing of the house which consisted of a

SAINT ON THE MARCH

long room under deeply cambered thatch, divided into cubicles by mud walls 2 feet thick and 6 feet high. In each cubicle a raised mud platform which served as a bench, bed or shrine; extraordinary how cool these simple mud buildings are compared with the pretentious brick mansion of yesterday. Vinoba is outside on the veranda on a wooden bunk exposed like an image to the passionate scrutiny of the populace. On arrival at 7.30 he took his bath at the well in the courtyard, watched ironically by two baby buffaloes. At 8 he was breakfasting bolt upright facing a battery of forty pairs of eyes. From 8.30 to 9 he read the newspapers (national papers reach us three days late here, the locals only two). From 9 to 10 he was spinning—the first half hour silently, the second talking to the onlookers. From 10 to 11, turning his back on his audience, he curled up for an hour's sleep (he had, of course, been up since 3 a.m.). From 11 to 12.30 he interviewed various people from the village up at the darker end of the veranda among untidy heaps of rice-sifters and reaping-hooks: it was as near as he could get to privacy. Then lunch and half an hour's read. Then, just as the *loo* was doing its best to imitate an oxy-acetylene welder, he was escorted round the village by a band of pipes and clay drums. Most of the songs sung by the escort were Socialist, but embedded in the rest was a famous devotional lyric, "Who will come to Brindaban to see Krishna?" Hearing this, Vinoba said: "I am in Brindaban. To me every village is Brindaban and every villager—man, woman or child—is an incarnation of God's spirit. You are all my Krishnas and I have come to worship you."

Apart from the house where we were staying, there was no single cottage in which he could stand erect.

And no single room with windows for the sun.

And a widow threw herself at his feet, crying: "A relative of my husband's has seized my acre of land and has persuaded me to register it in his name."

And Vinoba enquired of the relative. The relative confessed his guilt.

PIE-DOGS AND PHARISEES

"Return the land to its rightful owner," Vinoba said, and the relative agreed.

And the widow promised the land to *Bhoodan*.

She lived in one dark room, mud walls cracked and peeling because she had no cow, and thus could not smear the cottage with the mixture of mud and cow-dung that should be applied daily by every prudent Indian housewife. There was a clay pot with water in it, a flat iron frying-pan, three tin lids and a blackened hole in the mud floor which served as a cooking-stove. The only piece of furniture was an old orange box, and in it the widow's year-old babe born after her husband's death. Vinoba peered down and said: "Here is the Lord Krishna playing in his cradle." It was like a doctor saying, "This child has measles," or "I advise you to use Pear's Baby Soap." He spoke with no trace of sentiment.

I believe his only moment free of the village was when he was interviewed by myself and two Western students—one Swiss and one American, who had arrived miraculously out of the wrinkled haze of afternoon. When we came he looked at the upturned faces pressed round his cot, then said, "Let us go somewhere where we can speak unobserved," and I suspect his reason was a sensitivity to Western decorum as well as the old shyness about speaking English. He led us across the fields to the one local tree.

Sitting on a spiky 6-inch hillock of turf which, baked now to the consistency of rock, skewers your underside in a dozen places is not a good position for taking notes, so I spent the interview wondering why it was that, in spite of his air of austerity and dedication and the acute discomfort of my posterior, I yet felt so utterly relaxed in Vinoba's presence. Any written description tends to make him sound remote. It is so hard to explain just why he is not. Perhaps it is his utter lack of fanaticism. When he talks to you he is not trying to persuade you to anything, he is merely thinking out loud—clearly, logically, beautifully. If you agree, he says, then come with me. If you don't, I shall respect you just as much. His

SAINT ON THE MARCH

humility is so great that he is too humble even to have noticed it. It allows him to be the most rational and clear-headed of saints.

He does not go into repetitive raptures about the music of the spinning-wheel as Gandhi did. This afternoon he tells us: "I like the spindle for a very good reason. It means decentralisation. When every house keeps its own spindle flying, then I shall know that the masses of India have power in their hands and that they have developed self-reliance and a true spirit of independence. I do not believe that there is any other simple and necessary manual work which can be done by everybody—women and children, young and old—as spinning can. And which can be done in spare time, like your Western women knit. I would be glad if the cottage spindles were operated by electricity. Why not? It would show that electrification had been conceived to serve the villages and not merely to increase the wealth of towns."

I watch his face carefully as he speaks. It is smooth, but the cheeks are pitted each side with two sharp hollows, as if a portion has been gnawed away and the skin had drawn tight round the wound. It is this, perhaps, which gives him, in spite of serenity and twinkling eyes, a look of conquered suffering. His body is not the emaciated affair journalists love to ascribe to an Indian saint. By the standard of most Bihar peasants, it is well-covered, and his milk diet gives it a glossy texture. The legs are well-shaped, with high calves. He must once have been well muscled, but his muscles have not run to fat or wrinkled skin. The loose, slackened sinew is ready for rebuilding. It is a body which impresses one as a perfect instrument for its owner's needs and which, through care and discipline, has conquered ulcers, malaria and amoebic dysentery.

At the end of our interview I ask whether I can take a photograph in close-up. "Robbers don't knock at the front door before they break into a house," Vinoba says.

"I am asking for a gift," I reply. "I had no intention of stealing."

Vinoba looks quizzical: "You have mistaken your trade. The best photographs are stolen. Next time remember you're a thief, and don't advertise the fact." And he skips nimbly out of my view-finder, leaving me wondering a little ruefully at what point this talent for repartee was added to him.

The prayer meeting in this Socialist and politically conscious village undergoes a subtle change. It is "managed"—chiefly by a black-faced, steely-eyed, square-jawed Socialist volunteer, who is the nearest thing to a commissar I have yet seen in India. Vinoba's gentle suggestion that the women at the back of the meeting should come further into the audience is translated into a hectoring bark of command. Vinoba scolds the audience too, but in his own way; when there is love, he can afford to scold—but not before. "I am told there is a lot of toddy-drinking here. If you indulge in such things, can you expect to be worthy of the revolution that we are trying to achieve? If you get land, will you not lose it again unless you can care for it properly? God sends rain, but He cannot send showers of food and clothing. You will have to learn to work for yourselves, then God will work with you too. If you continue to snooze after sunrise, how can you enjoy the warmth of the rising sun?"

Sumitra has revealed a miraculous store of mangoes, although the season is still not due for several weeks. She appears to have eaten none whatever herself, but, after pressing half a dozen on me, turns the rest into a *sherbet* for Gopi Sen, who is groaning with fever on one of the mud bunks. She was up till all hours translating speeches. Damodar has had to leave to attend to business elsewhere and Sumitra having come as a mere onlooker, is now clearly indispensable.

An extraordinary night. Straw was strewn for us on the broken ground in front of the house and we lay there with an

SAINT ON THE MARCH

infinity of sky and stars as our only cover. But the noise! Someone said to me the other day: "You people of the West can't bear to be alone. As soon as you are left alone you rush off to the flicks or look at television." But the average Indian I might have replied, never *is* alone, and precisely because he dreads being faced with the Western dilemma. The awful remoteness of the earth and sky in which he is engulfed has to be screened from view, for who but saints can remain sane in contemplation of their own littleness? If he is ill, instead of the privacy for which the Westerner craves, the Indian expects six visitors to stand round his bedside kneading and pummeling his arms and legs, and a further six to pour water over his head. House a servant and you find that you have his grandma and fifth cousin's aunt on your hands as well. Open an office, and before you quite know why you are giving employment to a dozen *peons*. Sometimes I wonder whether it is not Europeanisation that India has suffered from in setting up Western institutions, but "peonisation." So it is to-night. First the villagers come and squat round watching us trying to sleep and chatting in an animated fashion as they do so. My companions, who take it as a matter of course, are soon snoring soundly, and I feel a mean wretch for wishing to deprive the audience of their diversion. Then, at midnight, the villagers disperse and the dogs take over. The pie-dogs, which seem so pitiful and cowardly by day and creep shivering out of your way as soon as look at you, now stand in a ring within a few feet of our heads letting out continuous and blood-curdling howls. When I sit up and plan to retreat indoors, they start to snarl in the most vicious manner and close in several terrifying inches. I hastily change my mind, pretending that it is much pleasanter out here, anyway (houses wait for the night to release the sun's heat from storage). I am still awake at 3 a.m., when Vinoba begins to stir.

To-day we are heading back towards Bodh Gaya, the site of the Third Annual Conference of the *Sarvodaya* Society held

PIE-DOGS AND PHARISEES

since the *Bhoodan* movement started, the site of the *bo* tree¹ under which the Buddha is said to have been enlightened, the site, so the gloomier critics of *Bhoodan* have prophesied, of Vinoba's Waterloo. . . .

¹ In India the *bo* tree is called *bodhi*, tree of enlightenment: hence the name of the village.

“... ROADS TO BODH GAYA TEMPLE ...”

“THIS IS NO GOOD, this Vinoba. What rubbish is all this begging, isn't it? Vinoba, stop this bloody begging.” The speaker—or, rather, the shouter—is himself a beggar, a sloppy, lousy, practically naked one, with hair spreading like a poisonous creeper over a crapulous, yellow paunch. He is the Brahmin in charge of a shrine scarcely bigger than a dog's kennel which has been incorporated in the conference site at Bodh Gaya and now stands incongruously at the back of the main compound just in front of Vinoba's hut. As we start each session, the Brahmin—who spends the rest of the day in slumber—emerges from his dog's kennel as regularly as a Dutch figure on a weather clock and spits curses on us. He always spits in English. Perhaps, I reflect, he is one those “B.A. failed” who advertise so pitifully in the agony columns of the Indian Press. Or perhaps a Government official who has lost his post with the passing of the British Raj.

Whatever he is, the conference takes little notice of him. There are 7,000 of us squatting on the burning, sandy soil of Bihar, with the marquee shading no more than a fortunate handful. Round us our sleeping-huts built into a mango grove, a whole township of bamboo matting that spreads like a labyrinth through the trees. Hour after broiling hour we squat in the sunlight with no more than two pairs of dark spectacles between the lot of us (one of them mine), spinning as we listen to speeches from the dais. On the edge of the crowd hovers a graceful bevy of maidens, who supply us with water from the earthen jars on their hips, pouring with unerring aim into parched and quivering lips which, equally skilled, gulp the stream of liquid straight down. (I tried, but ended by choking all over my shirt.)

The Brahmin's emergence scarcely causes a ripple. One or two look up and smile tolerantly. A water-bearer pauses, shading her eyes with her *sari* and peering in the direction of the shrine. Vinoba continues to exhort us imperturbably through the microphone. No one suggests quietening the interloper, much less chucking him out. By the end I conceive a twisted affection for his frowsty and toad-like figure. It is so typical of India that he should be allowed to remain, a sort of licensed buffoon, right in the heart of our earnest deliberations. In a way, too, he personifies Indian doubts about the movement, combining the superficial scepticism of the Westernised (his *babu* English) with the fury of the vagrant orthodox Hindu priest who sees all progress as a threat to a caste system that allows him to scratch a scruffy living from beggary.

My priest is not the only eccentric character gathered with us in the mango grove. There is a goodly influx from the lunatic fringe: People with a plan for uniting the world's students or lawyers or even dentists who intend travelling abroad for that very purpose in the near future. People who rush at me out of the night, clasp me fervently by both hands, insist on our exchanging names and addresses and, swearing vows of eternal friendship, then rush off, never to be seen again. People who buttonhole me with a Thurberesque gleam in one eye and a mystical opacity in the other. "Of course, you know why this *Bhoodan* will fail, isn't it?"

"Fail?" I mutter, nervously backing a couple of paces.

"Yes; fail. It will fail. It must fail. There is too much violence."

"Violence?"

"Yes; it will never succeed until workers take last meal before sunset."

"Why?"

"How can we see who insects have settled on food when it is already dark? That is enough violence to wipe out all the rest what is done, isn't it?"

"Then you don't work for *Bhoodan*?" I counter feebly.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

A puffing of chest at once proud and scornful: "Of course not. I come to tell this Vinobaji to eat before sunset. That is mission God tells to me." When there are no dogmatic limits to what God can do or say—and there are none in Hinduism—He tells us, it seems, some pretty extraordinary things.

On the last evening of the conference I am sitting on my cotton blanket talking to the only other Englishman here—David, whose blond beard, blue eyes and pink cheeks mask a mind of unexpected common sense. A delegate peers hopefully round the door. "You perhaps brothers?" he asks with a bright conspiratorial smile. I explain that we have never seen each other before Bodh Gaya. He nods reflectively and disappears. Three minutes later he is back again: "You perhaps brothers-in-law?" I repeat the explanation in Bengali which he claims to understand. He disappears only to return yet again, this time accompanied by a friend. "I want him meet you two two great brothers who leave mother to come all way together from England to devote yourself to cause of *Bhoodan*."

Much of India's lunatic fringe retains the childish and servile attitude to the Sahib that used to be common in the old India. That is why Westerners are their natural target—few other people to-day show this exaggerated deference to a white skin. At first I am rather taken aback at the number of fringers who seem to have been caught up in the wake of *Bhoodan*. Gradually I come to accept them as a virtue, or at least the defect of a virtue. *Bhoodan* is tolerant. It does not reject or rebuke the unconventional in the way that a Western movement would. As long as they are harmless and do not create a public nuisance, let the lunatics join in.

It is a paradox, but perhaps not as strange a one as it sounds, that a country which for centuries laboured under the most rigid and traditional of social systems should at the same time have encouraged the crank and eccentric to a degree that makes California or Montmartre look like girls' boarding schools. Although you were allowed to eat only with your caste fellows, you could think what you liked and make what-

"... ROADS TO BODH GAYA TEMPLE ..."

ever approach to God fitted your temperament and mental capacities. Round about the time of Christ there flourished a school of atheists and materialists whose writings are still considered part of the orthodox Hindu canon: they are held to be legitimate Hindus who investigated the operation of the divine in the purely sensory and physical world. Even if your religious beliefs did prompt you to break the rigid social conventions, you were ostracised, but you were not imprisoned, tortured, burnt at the stake or stoned to death. Instead, you moved around the villages begging as you went and preaching your new ideas, and you ended, as like as not, the founder of a new sect with its own *credo* of orthodoxy. Thus to-day there are sects who seek God through a simple idol worship not far removed from animism, others whose sense of the divinity of all life is so high that they will not eat vegetables or engage in agriculture for fear of the insects which may be destroyed in the process, others again to whom the sword is a sacred emblem. Each have their peculiar form of dress and sectarian markings, the food they will eat and the food they won't, months, days, deities, rivers, hills, birds, trees, animals, places which are hallowed for them with some especial sanctity.

Stand in any street in Calcutta or Bombay and within ten minutes you can be certain of seeing at least 100 different types of costume go past—everything from the merest linen fig leaf or poplin slumber wear to turbaned Sikhs, gold-capped Marwaris, check-skirted Bengali Moslems. To the Indian there is nothing confusing in all this. "There are as many ways to God as there are paths to Kalighat Temple." Sooner or later all will seek Him as best they can. God is not something that is revealed for us all at once and for all eternity. He is a series of beacons set along the slopes of a mountain. Each follows his own beacon, yet when he reaches it there will be another beckoning him beyond. "We rise on stepping-stones of our dead selves to higher things," and if we fail to make it in this life then there are fresh chances open to us in the future. Not that we migrate, as individual entities, into another body, but

SAINT ON THE MARCH

rather that we pass on the results of our failures and successes from one generation to the next as a guttering candle can transfer its flame: an idea that seems to me not out of keeping with St. Paul's claim that "we are members of one another."

Bodh Gaya marks *Bhoodan* as something gloriously, exuberantly, fantastically Indian. Thank heaven for it in a world that is becoming rapidly more standardised every day. Look round at the crowd and see, not the tepid conformity of a Western audience with its identical lounge suits, but characters that are etched deep into every face. Do you want the didactic school-master? Then there is K., who bores us for a whole hour with an entirely irrelevant lecture on Japanese Buddhism, peering benignly over the top of his rimless spectacles as if at an unexpectedly docile class.

The prophetic? Here the choice is rich in the extreme. The variety of beard alone could probably not be matched among the total population of any other country on God's earth. There is the fiercely declamatory type, black and thick and sticking out at right angles—an angry prophet this. Then, of course, there is the sprightly beard of Baba Raghav Das, a gay prophet tripping about with his staff and homespun shawl like a Biblical shepherd set to music. Finally, the cascading splendour of Gopabhandhu Chaudhury, leader of *Bhoodan* in Orissa and brother of the Prime Minister of his state. This beard has brought 100,000 acres to the movement and persuaded twenty-seven fishing villages to put all their lands into a common pool. Can you wonder? It is sculptured in grey marble like a Praxitiles bust. Gopabhandhu never touches it nor shows the least consciousness of its existence—though you'd think the mere weight of it alone demanded a continual effort. Touched, it might lose its potency and remind one, not of ancient Greece, but of Father Christmas in a 10-cent store.

The pious? Of these the selection is even more catholic. There are the saffron robes of the Buddhist priest, the yellow ones of the wandering Hindu hermit, the half-starved anchorite with a radiant smile, the haggard *Shaivite* from Mysore with a

pointed, aristocratic face and no clothing above the hip except a sacred thread and fierce Shiva trident slashed in red between delicate arched brows. Like Shiva himself, he has obviously wrestled with serpents, but now instead he guides his ten-year-old son through the *mêlée* with an air of intense and brooding tenderness.

Artistic? Yes; *Bhoo-dan* even caters for them. There is Gopal here from the United Provinces, where he earns his living as musician to a troupe of dancers. And with everyone else proclaiming their professions in capital letters, Gopal too must look like an Aesthete from the *Yellow Book*. He has hair down to the shoulders, long, tapering fingers and appears to be languishing in the last stage of consumption. Give him a lute, however, and he springs to vigorous life. His uvula leaps up and down like a float in a high wind, his eyes roll and he flings his head from side to side with a wild flourish of his great black mane. This is the fervently emotional type of singing favoured by villagers, but much frowned on by the pundits.

There are eight Westerners here—apart from the occasional visitors—four of them American, two (David and myself) British, one Frenchman and the superb Franco-Italian, Lanza Del Vasto, who has clearly stepped straight out of an El Greco canvas “Madonna and Two [attenuated] Saints.” Interesting the predominance of Americans, and so different from six years ago. Now wherever one goes an American has been there before—and probably a young, idealistic, “interested” one, too. Out of the huge British business population still in the country (I have heard it put as high as several hundred thousand), it seems sad that we can only muster two at Bodh Gaya—and both of them migrants. Partly this reflects the way the interest of our younger idealists is turning away from India in the direction of Africa, partly the fact that our universities cannot afford the amounts available in America for travelling fellowships. Yet I have the feeling that more young Americans are building up relationships of real equality with India now than we ever succeeded in achieving in the days of

SAINT ON THE MARCH

British rule. And the fact remains that, if America is unpopular here, individual Americans are far from being so.

The most exotic of us Westerners is undoubtedly Pat; the young New England girl who has been with *Bhoodan* for over a year. Exotic because she seems so forbiddingly unaware of the fact. Dressed in a white *sari* like a Hindu widow, she has taken a vow only to speak in Hindi (which she scarcely relaxes even for me, who doesn't understand it), and she flits silently at the back of Vinoba's court-yard. In Gaya Hospital with an acute throat infection, she insisted on staying in a public ward, much to the distress of the staff, since she insisted too that they treat all the other patients with the care and consideration that they wanted to show to her.

On the third day a young man walks in from Andhra, a mere 800 miles off—a dull-looking young man. Lighten his skin and he could pass as twelfth man of his college cricket team. He is square-shouldered, open-faced, crop-haired, without beard, moustache, side-burns, and dressed in a plain *dhoti* and shirt. He speaks Telugu in a low, laconic voice. If you watch hard, however, you might notice something odd about him as he talks. His tongue is forked like an adder's, way back to the roots. Why? Because he is a practised *batha yogin* whose life is devoted to gaining complete mastery over his body: when he is buried alive underground (his longest sojourn has been a mere twenty-four days) he can block both nasal passages with the forks and thus keep himself in cold storage.

He has come to demonstrate his art to Vinoba, but Vinoba, it seems, has not time to watch. Might we watch instead? Oh, by all means, he replies shyly, if you're sure it would really interest you. Soon there is an ugly crush round him—the eight Europeans prominent in the forefront. The young man lies down meekly and asks us what we would like to see. Can he stop his heart? He grins. Oh yes, of course. He does that for three minutes every day. It is vital to be able to rest the circulation. And he obligingly does so there and then while we lean

over with a stethoscope searching in vain for any sign of a beat in the bare and brawny chest. As he buttons up his shirt again someone asks him if he can do the rope trick. He *has* done it, he says as quietly as a schoolboy being modest about his batting average. Then, as if to warn us, he starts to explain why his prowess is neither difficult nor important. Mere subjugation of the body has no spiritual value. Anyone can learn to stop his own heart if he tries hard enough, but only a saint like Vinoba can change the hearts of others. That same evening, after a five-minutes' interview with Vinoba, our *yogin* starts to walk home again to Andhra. . . .

Yet it is the women—as always in India—who fascinate most, and they, like the *batha yogin*, without the slightest outward trace of eccentricity. There is Malati Devi Chaudhury, wife of the Chief Minister of Orissa and sister-in-law of Gopabhandhu, who has not a single feature moulded according to the text-book ideals of beauty—East or West—and yet who draws one's eyes like a magnet. What is it about her? The proud structure of bone on which her flesh is so firmly moulded? The full, moist lips? The cascade of thick, shiny, waving hair (a defect by Indian standards, who like their hair straight)? Malati Devi looks out at the world as if it was a particularly loved and welcome guest. Although we have not met for six years—and even then only briefly—she remembers things about me which I had long since forgotten. Then there is her close friend, Asha Devi, perhaps the most famous of Gandhi's women disciples. She is Chairman of the conference, and in spite of responsibilities and silvered hair still carries some of the wide-eyed wonder of girlhood—and all of its beauty—well into middle-age.

Janaki Devi, widow of Jammalal Bajaj, the “Gandhian” capitalist, stands like some gaunt priestess one afternoon in front of the microphone. On September 11th, 1953, she had taken a vow to collect 108 wells by the date of Gandhi's birthday three weeks later: she had reached her target a few seconds before the deadline. This year she was appealing to

SAINT ON THE MARCH

women to give up their jewellery and already she had half a stone of gold. . . .

One worker, scarcely more than a girl, is pointed out to me. She has the look of the Indian bride, paralysed with shyness: she speaks habitually in a whisper with her *sari* up to her mouth. A landlord in a certain village was known to be hard-hearted and lascivious. One spring afternoon this girl knocked at his door.

"Who is there?"

"Your sister. Please come."

"I have a bad reputation in the locality," he said half-laughing. "You'd better not come here."

"What of that? I have only come to see my brother." She told him that she was working for *Bhoodan* and asked him to contribute some land. He agreed.

"And now," she whispered, "I would like you to walk round the village with me—so as to help me secure more gifts."

"I'm afraid I shall prove a bit of a liability."

"I don't think so. Please be good enough to come with me."

"If you insist——"

Gandhi attracted the Westernised middle class and the adoration of peasants, yet did he reach the core of Hinduism in this way? Was there not something hybrid about the organisation that he started? About the *Survodaya* conference there is nothing the slightest bit hybrid. But then there is practically no trace of organisation—at least in any Western sense of the word. To those of us who regard Indian ways of doing things as hopelessly inefficient (which they are when they try merely to imitate the West) the fact that the conference works so admirably is surely little short of a miracle. We forget that Hinduism has never been "organised" in any Western sense, but, like Vinoba, has spread its message from heart to altered heart, through a succession of saints, mystics and reformers.

Not one of our 7,000 conferees has come as a "delegate."

“ . . . ROADS TO BODH GAYA TEMPLE . . . ”

They are here merely as *sevaks*—servants—who meet for refreshment and inspiration from contact with their source. Each has paid for his own train journey (the Government allowed a considerable concession on fares); those not able to afford it merely came on foot. We are housed in 100 interlocking rooms built of bamboo matting and nailed to the mango trees; for clothes-pegs, we use the branches to hang our shirts on. We sleep forty to a room on the floor over which a rush mat has been laid and straw strewn. We eat in a vast tent roofed with tattered strips of sacking, and with further strips laid across the earth for us to sit on.

Nothing ever happens at a regular time—there are no announcements, bulletin boards, mimeographed hand-outs. Lights—for the mango grove has been specially electrified by the Bihar Government—are left on all night. And those who want to sleep, about half of us, merely settle down and do so. On the whole, however, we seem to manage to do things in a coherent sequence. We gather without fuss as soon as Vinoba appears on the platform for the “sessions.” We know instinctively when the meals will be served—though once our instinct betrays us and we wait in a giant crocodile for close on an hour.

Some of the credit for the smooth working of the conference goes to the huge tide of volunteers who sweep through the encampment every morning, laying down fresh straw, emptying rubbish baskets, digging latrines. We are even sought out with mail. On the second morning a volunteer enters my hut with a huge sheaf of letters. “Anything for me?” I call out.

“No, nothing, I’m afraid. But do you know who this friend is? I’ve a lot for him.” And he shows me an envelope with my name typed clearly on top.

Meals never take more than half an hour, even though they are served to 2,000 of us at a time. This is partly due to their extreme simplicity—coarse wheaten porridge sweetened with unrefined molasses for breakfast, for lunch and supper wheat

SAINT ON THE MARCH

chapattis or rice, potato curry and a spoonful of salt and clarified butter—but mostly again to the enthusiastic army of volunteers who sweep down the lines with armfuls of leaf plates doling out the (barely) edibles from iron pots. Who are these volunteers? They are not pressed into work; they just work. There are always enough of them and usually far too many. I notice that even the lunatic fringe is prominent in its enthusiasm for service. This is the relationship between efficiency and disorganisation as Vinoba sees it: that we should consume ourselves in a fury of service because our hearts have caught the glory of it. Even I teeter ineffectually for an hour or two among the vast iron-clad army of cooking pots.

UNDER TREES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

VINOBA, OF COURSE, is the spring that keeps this complex machinery in motion. We have caught the ideal from him. Yet he doesn't, apparently, do anything to keep us up to it. He never inspects the latrines or chides certain dormitories for untidiness, like a good Scoutmaster would. He is like those "carriers" of disease who can infect others with fever while they themselves remain untouched.

He sits on the platform in front of a pillow which Mahadevi Thai has insisted on placing there for him. But he does not use it; as always, he is bolt upright. He wears a fine-spun white shawl, his best, that he spun and wove himself. The audience is a trifle restive. The heat is intense and certain brothers from Saurashtra or Mysore have been vaporising profusely in front of the microphone. The low hum of the spinning wheels, which counterpoints the cooler morning session, has stopped. There is a wiggling of feet, an irritated shifting of buttocks, a buzzing whisper of boredom. Peasants—once they have the courage to start speaking in public—seem desperately afraid to stop. The meeting under the liquefying sun has already lasted three hours. Someone attempting to swat a mosquito catches his neighbour a clip on the ear, someone else, folding the wooden case of his spinning wheel, pinches a nearby foot. Only Vinoba sits cool as a marble column, staring straight ahead: occasionally he flicks his right shoulder under the loose fold of his shawl or thoughtfully sucks in his cheeks. Then the boring brother from south India has at last finished (not boring for me, since, having no Hindi, like most south Indians, he speaks in English). There is a movement under Vinoba's shawl. An arm emerges. He is ready to speak. The microphone

SAINT ON THE MARCH

is moved close. Everyone stops talking and shuffling and leans forward to listen.

During the four days of the conference Vinoba must have spoken for a total of eighteen hours. Yet not one word that he utters is ever dull, repetitive or dry. He speaks entirely without notes and with a mathematical precision, choosing every word with care, his voice dipping evenly onwards like a musical spinning-top. Leonardo's lightest anatomical sketch, Bernard Shaw's frivolous remarks about the weather, Mozart's march written to get a fat bishop up the aisle of Salzburg—such things bear the stamp of their author's genius. So it is with Vinoba; his simplest words are sparks from a hidden fire—a fire that never goes out.

Three times now I have heard him draw on the fantastic treasure-house of Hindu legend to elucidate the meaning and origins of *Bhoodan*. But each time the legend has been different and each time it has been related with that vivid economy of detail whose secret died in the West with the last wandering minstrel. First there was the story of King Bali approached by an early incarnation of the god Vishnu for a boon. The King's sage knew who the beggar was, and transformed himself into an insect so as to block the spout of the silver chalice from which water would be poured if the boon was granted. The divine mendicant saw the insect and poked a stick up the spout. . . . The boon? As much land as the god could encompass in three paces. When it was granted, he turned himself into a giant and in two paces covered the whole world. Having no room left for his third pace, King Bali offered his head. *Bhoodan*, the gift of land, says Vinoba, must one day turn into *Bali dan*, Bali's gift. The whole world must be given over to God. . . .

Next he tells of the Pandavas who fought the classic battle described in the *Mahabharata*, against the forces of evil. The cause of the battle? Their relatives refused to let them inherit their rightful share of land. First they asked not for a kingdom, but a city; then not for a city but a village; then not for a

UNDER TREES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

village, but a house; then not for a house, but a room; and so on until they were offered finally as much land as could be lifted on the point of a needle. They decided to take up arms. So will the poor of to-day, says Vinoba, if we continue to whittle down their rights. . . . Finally, there is the forgotten brother, Korana, in the same story, the sixth son who had been hidden away at birth—and whom Vinoba sees as symbolic of the submerged sixth in modern society. He it was who poisoned the ears of one branch of the family against the other, and who, armed with the bracelet which his mother had given him, became all-powerful in battle. Do we want, Vinoba asks, to forget our sixth brother like the Pandavas did and so stir up hatred and strife?

The great ones come to visit us. They arrive in fleets of shining Government Cadillacs, which are parked (the bonnets garlanded with marigold and jasmin) in a special plot marked "V.I.P. cars only" just at the entrance of the mango grove. The first to come is Prime Minister Nehru himself, who reaches Gaya airport by special plane on the Conference's opening day, April 18th—the third anniversary of the first *Bhoodan* gift at Pochempelli. The Bihar Government provides an escort of 1,000 plain-clothes police and 2,000 military, who mill round the mango grove all day. But the conference takes remarkably little notice. It is already in session when the Prime Minister arrives. He moves through the lane roped off in the middle of the compound, nodding from side to side like a powerful, handsome, quick-stepping, light-built bull followed into the show-ring by a herd of secretaries, aides, photographers and security men. Vinoba welcomes him touchingly. His flower garlands are exchanged for garlands of home-spun yarn. "There is often little affinity of heart between many of us, even though we belong to the family of Mahatma Gandhi," Vinoba says. "But though hundreds of miles separate you and me, and although the work you have chosen is so different from mine, yet I feel that our hearts are close."

SAINT ON THE MARCH

Then as a "mere outsider" conscious of the "terrible burdens which our political leaders have taken up," Vinoba makes a suggestion. Why do they need the present system of elections? Why cannot all the parties join together in a programme of public service? There are good men to be found in all the parties. Let them unite, and let Members of Parliament be chosen for their merits and integrity rather than their label. It is Gandhi's "last will and testament," the draft constitution that he drew up for the Congress on the evening before his assassination, brought suddenly to life.

The *loo* has got caught in the compound like a wild beast. It tears strips from the doors of the bamboo huts, blows the rubbish-baskets over the sand with a noise like a rattlesnake, hurls unripe mangoes at us from the trees. But I brave the fiery furnace, welded to the burning outer rim of the crowd. Everyone leans forward watching the Prime Minister's face. He looks strained as he begins to talk, the eyes heavily stained with shadow. We must think about all this, he says. At least we can meet together on the platform of *Sarvodaya* in goodwill and without quarrelling. Conscientiously he avoids rhetoric, and speaks, not like the Prime Minister of the second largest population in the world, but like a puzzled and burdened man. Vinoba, one feels, has turned the Prime Minister's eyes into his very soul. Is not this how he affects us all?

Rhetoric storms back in the evening to fill the gap. Prayers are held outside in the rice-fields, where a platform 30 feet high has been erected and a huge barricade of stakes put up to contain the expected crowd. The audience is estimated at 500,000: even divided by the necessary three, this is still a pretty large total when you remember that we are in one of the less-populated rural districts of Bihar. Will the farmer who owns the land we are using get compensation? Apparently he will consider it sufficient reward to have had it trampled on by the worshippers. Up on the platform beneath huge arc-lights, and amplified by a hundred loudspeakers, Nehru grows passionate. His voice echoes to the stars, which come out one by one to

UNDER TREES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

listen. What does he talk about? Land reform? *Bhoodan*? Government policy towards agriculture? None of them. He is inveighing against caste and predicting the country's ruin unless they root out caste prejudice for ever from their minds. What will the minorities do if we behave so badly towards them? Can we blame them if they lose faith in our professions of tolerance and friendship? It is impressive, deeply felt, but hardly different from many other speeches he has made in the last six years.

What *are* his ideas on India's land problem? Where does the *Bhoodan* Movement fit into these ideas? When I had asked him in Delhi at what stage the Government would feel strong enough to introduce a more basic land reform, he strenuously objected to my question. Basic land reform had been passed. The *zamindars* and *rentiers* had been abolished by law in nearly every state. Besides, land reform was not a federal matter. It depended on each provincial government. What more, then, could the central Government do? The expropriated *zamindars* had swollen the ranks of the unemployed. Land ceiling? Redistribution? The Prime Minister gave a wary shrug. When I asked what he felt to be *Bhoodan's* chances of reaching its 50,000,000-acre target, he twiddled a silver pencil in strong, nervous, artistic hands and told me I should go and judge for myself. This is not to suggest that Nehru is tepid in his support for *Bhoodan*. He has gone as far as Vinoba will allow him in giving it administrative aid. But he and Vinoba respect each other's spheres of action. Vinoba would make but a poor Prime Minister and Nehru a back-sliding saint. Each knows the importance of what the other does and tries to avoid trespassing.

President Rajendra Prasad, who visits us two days later, is less inscrutable. A self-confessed pacifist, he is regularly photographed inspecting immaculate detachments of troops, himself dressed in coarse homespun. He is bewildered, and frankly says so. I visit him in the bungalow put at his disposal outside Gaya for the day of his visit to the conference.

SAINT ON THE MARCH.

His entry into the room takes me by surprise—he is so astoundingly like the dear old gardener we had at home when I was a child. His face wreathed in perpetual benevolence shows little trace of the legal profession, which, like that of so many other leading Indians, it once adorned. He tells me that after Gandhi's death many of his followers turned away from his ideals. Yet if the path pursued by the rest of the world led to destruction, how could India take that path with any firmness or confidence? Two years back he had been in darkness, but now all that he had once thought dead seemed to be flooding slowly back to life. He came to the conferences from the fetid atmosphere of Delhi, and felt his own suspense and hesitation growing less. Perhaps the country's suspense was going, too. He could not say. As he speaks he gazes at me with his grey, melancholy eyes so oddly creased at the corners with lines of laughter. Has ever such candour and simplicity adorned so high an office? He lives in the old Viceregal palace, once the scene of durbars and banquets of sumptuous splendour. He wears open-toed sandals and coarse homespun. Yet he is as dignified as any Viceroy.

Vinoba is not a politician as these men are. He is not spreading himself over half a hundred problems, but keeping rigidly to one problem at a time. He is level-headed enough to know his limitations, even though they are the limitations of saintliness. Perhaps, if he wanted, he too could enter politics, summoning legions of angels to his side. But he refrains. It is this humility that makes him seem so much greater than the great who have been visiting him. In his presence they become as little children—and rather puzzled and shamefaced children at that. They listen to his advice. They may not agree with it, but they accept it in the quiet and loving spirit in which it is given, and they go away cheered, chastened and, perhaps, a little changed. Seeing him with the politicians, one realises that it is not a new religion which Vinoba and Gandhi have started, but a new dynasty. A dynasty of king-makers, whose blessing confers potency on their nation's leaders. To-day

UNDER TREES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Vinoba may not yet have fulfilled his role. But perhaps the time will come. . . .

The most important convert from the angry arena of politics is Jai Prakash Narayan, ex-leader of the Socialist Party, who was once famous as a firebrand and tipped as Nehru's successor. Son of a poor peasant, Jai Prakash won a series of Government scholarships and, thirsty for knowledge, but eager to boycott the universities controlled by the British, he worked his way to California, got a job as a fruit-packer and started to study at Berkeley University. He spent eight years in the United States studying science and economics at five universities, and worked as a farm-labourer, waiter and factory hand. At Wisconsin an American professor took a hand in converting him to Marxism, and he returned to become India's foremost left-wing leader. He was jailed by the British in 1932, and emerged to found the Railway Workers' Union, now 1,000,000 strong, as well as the Indian Socialist Party. He was imprisoned again in 1939 and led a fifty-one-day hunger strike against prison conditions; then he escaped by scaling a 20-foot prison wall and went into hiding in the jungles. In 1946 he took his Socialists out of the Congress, organised the great railway strike and led his party to the polls, where they obtained 10,000,000 votes and proved themselves the only party able to challenge the Congress on a national scale.

Jai Prakash is a six-foot, gangling figure with deep, reflective grey eyes, a shy smile and the square jaw of a heavyweight boxer. Outsiders expected a political element to enter the movement with the conversion of this controversial leader. They were mistaken. Jai Prakash's conversion was complete. Last summer he went on a fast of self-purification at the nature clinic in Poonah, where he takes treatment for his diabetes. Since then he has undergone an almost physical change. He walks slowly, moves his hands in deliberate, hieratic gestures, talks (how hard to remember that he was once famous for his fervent oratory) as quietly as Vinoba himself and has ironed all trace of passion from his fine, strong face, which is dominated

SAINT ON THE MARCH

now, not by the steely, totalitarian jaw, but by the grave, grey eyes. Sitting in a dark corner of his tent, which is thronged with red-capped acolytes (Jai Prakash has himself discarded this emblem of Indian Socialism), he gazes quietly into the future. "My old Socialist comrades tell me that no change can be brought about without the aid of force or law. But I tell them that neither force nor law are needed to bring in the age of love. Does a mother need the sanction of law before she can feed her child?" Then he drops his eyes and makes a quick gesture of admonition at his wife, who, knowing him to be ill with anaemia and diabetes, is constantly calling him to rest. "We must be quick. Otherwise those who believe in violence will step over our dead bodies."

On the afternoon of the second day Jai Prakash speaks to the conference as a Bihari. "I am ashamed," he says. "We Biharis took a vow of 3,200,000 acres in order to solve the land problem of our province. We have kept *Baba* with us for eighteen months, but still this vow has not been fulfilled. If we have not even enough workers to solve the land problem in Bihar, how can we ever solve it in the rest of India? We need thousands and thousands of workers ready to give up their lives in the service of the revolution through love." A few minutes later, with scarcely a change in the gentle modulation of his voice, Jai Prakash himself vows to be the first life-worker. He abjures politics and takes a solemn pledge to devote his whole life to *Bhoodan*. At a session the following morning, in an atmosphere like a revivalist meeting, 656 other "life-gifts" are made by conference members. Among them a husband and wife who till then had been estranged by the disparity of their devotion to the cause, American Pat, who dedicates herself to the Negroes of her homeland, and one joint group of forty, a whole tent-load of workers from a southern province.

Jai Prakash's speech is the first mention I have heard of quotas during the whole conference, although in the weeks before it began the air resounded with a confused clamour of

UNDER TREES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

statistics. It is not till the same evening that it dawns on me that the quota fixed for April 18th, the famous first target of 2½ million acres, has been fulfilled by more than 700,000 acres.

It is the evening of the President's visit. There is another huge multitude at the prayer ground, spilling beyond the wooden palisades put up in sections to contain it. The audience stretches away into the dark silence of the open fields, where they squat like sleeping birds along the mud-banks built to hold monsoon water among the growing paddy. Round the edge of the palisades is a series of stalls selling *pan* (areca nut wrapped in betel leaf and pinned with clove), coconut water and fruit drinks of suspiciously vivid hue. Huge tents are set up heaped with water-jars and clay mugs—a mug of H₂O costing an anna a time. Further emphasising the fairground atmosphere are hawkers with dolls, peanuts and children's tops. It makes one realise how astonishingly free the conference has been of the perennial Indian passion for commerce. Thanks to rigorous censorship by ever-watchful volunteers, our only advertisement has been a flag hanging outside the Bengali tent and bearing the legend: "Study the Bengali Language and Learn to Appreciate India's Greatest Literature."

This evening round the stalls there is a great deal of chatter and quarrelling and laughter. The white figures gesticulating in the glare of the platform seem too distant to command respect. They are in fact about 300 yards away, and I reckon the total circumference of the crowd to be over a mile. Disembodied voices boom at us from a loudspeaker a few feet above our heads and roll echoing out across the dusky fields. Now someone on the platform is waving—what? A handkerchief? What's that he says? It is a few seconds before we can connect the puppet jerking about in the distance with the staccato cackle clattering from our loudspeaker. Apparently the Rajah of Ramgarh (who last year gave 100,000 acres at the Chandil conference) has just wired a further 400,000 to *Bhoodan*. The speaker is waving his telegram. "Then won't this

SAINT ON THE MARCH

bring the total well above the $2\frac{1}{2}$ million target?" I ask my companion in an awed whisper. He shrugs. It is already 300,000 acres above. But why hasn't more been made of the fact? Well, you heard what Jai Prakash said this afternoon. Bihar has still failed, even if the total all-India target has been fulfilled. Hazaribagh is the only district in Bihar that has achieved its target. Gaya is still only halfway to providing land for all its landless, although Vinoba has been here four times. Does the mountaineer rejoice when he reaches what he thought to be the peak only to find a fresh summit rearing its head beyond? No; he nerves himself to climb still further. The ideal is like Euclid's point in geometry: capable of being conceived by the mind, but incapable of being drawn even with the sharpest needle.

The next day the conference starts to disperse. There are no special buses, no elaborate time-tables of departure; just a quiet drifting away down the long, dusty road to Gaya laden with bundles of linen and prepared for a prolonged tussle with the Indian railways before they arrive home. In my tent, where I am soon the only one left, there is a continual stream of farewells. "If you come to Madras [or Gujerat or the Punjab or Travancore], you come as my great friend." The list of names and addresses takes on the alarming proportion of a petition. For Vinoba it is perhaps the busiest day of all. After a brisk walk at 4.30 a.m., he spends fifteen hours on end giving advice to the workers of each province, who visit him in turns.

Now that the volunteer defences are down, the traders sweep in with their stalls and baskets, and a litter of orange peel, pea-nut shells and paper bags begins to settle over the sand. But it is not scattered by us, who remain Puritans to the last. There is a festival soon due at the temple at Bodh Gaya, and a new class of pilgrim is moving in to take our place, although straw-matting is already being carted away by Government contractors, latrines sealed and the fire-engines that provided our water, removed.

UNDER TREES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

How typical! India, which is slow in so much else and often insists on carrying democratic discussion to heart-breaking lengths, can from the trusted "leader" accept and accelerate a new idea in record time. At the conference's opening session Vinoba said that he was thinking they ought to open a cultural centre in Bodh Gaya. Here adherents of the world's religions—and more particularly Hindus and Buddhists, to whom the place was so sacred—could meet and study together in harmony against a background of simple manual activity and village work. A local landlord immediately offered a site near the famous temple in which the Buddha is now worshipped by Hindus as the ninth and last incarnation of God, while Buddhists from all the world placidly meditate under the sacred *bo* tree outside, filling its branches with dancing oil lights. Nehru gave money for a well, and two days later President Prasad laid the foundation stone, to the accompaniment of hymns chanted by Nepali maidens. (How on earth were *they* rounded up for the occasion?) Now I understand that Vinoba—a mere five days after the idea occurred to him—is to go to the site to-morrow and rest there in the open fields while he plans the future activity of the centre in greater detail!

To-night I attempt to deal with the one thing that has profoundly irritated my neat Western mind throughout the conference. I rush round removing burning electric bulbs from empty rooms in an effort to save money. Many of them are hanging high up in the branches of the mango trees. I scramble up, endangering life and limb. As the bulbs are promptly stolen by the new pilgrims who are beginning to drift in, my effort is somewhat futile.

Falling asleep close on midnight, I have a curious dream. I am sitting by a pool in a dark wood. There is another figure squatting nearby, but his face is bent to the ground and I cannot see who it is. Suddenly he looks up over bifocal spectacles and gives a bony smile. Gandhi. He says nothing, but in the smile there is a hint of the old mischief. "Yes, whatever they may say, I am still alive." Then he beckons me over. I go and

SAINT ON THE MARCH

kneel in front of him and he touches my forehead with sandal-wood paste. The gesture is half a talisman and half a sign of brotherhood. I wake up moved and a little puzzled. For some reason, my lips form the words he had spoken to me when I first met him eight years before. "I would never have mistaken you for an Englishman."

To-day, I reflect, he could scarcely have mistaken me for anything else. For I feel no pressure to forget that I belong to the West nor to persuade others to forget it. I started my tour with Vinoba wearing the hand-woven Punjabi trousers kept reverently from my last stay in India, but as they soon developed a most embarrassing tear in the seat I have relapsed into more clumsy flannel drain-pipes. I cannot pretend to have eaten the conference food with the slightest relish, nor to have found congenial the fervent muddle in which the meeting has been run, nor even to have enjoyed sleeping on straw for an average of only four hours a night. Yet such things no longer cause any strain. Underneath, the sense of identification is so much more powerful than mere surface habits that it is not necessary to support it by changing the habits themselves. True dignity comes when we accept our own social, national, religious backgrounds and are prepared to sow the seeds of love and human brotherhood in the soil and climate which have nourished us. The universal is profoundly different from the merely cosmopolitan. How else could I be so certain—as I trudge happily through the dust towards Bodh Gaya, Vinoba's lantern dancing over the ground in front—that the message of this astonishingly Indian gathering transcends all narrow, domestic walls of nationality, creed or race?

COAXING THE FLAME

TRAVELLING IN SUMMER between wayside stations is one of India's less amusing pastimes. Short of the air-conditioned first-class which runs on two or three of the main routes, there is little to choose between second, third or intermediate as regards discomfort. In all three the hot, gritty wind hisses remorselessly across one's face—yet to shut the window is to invite suffocation. Personally, I prefer third class. It is cheap and, besides, there is so much more to watch—people playing traditional card-games or travelling with pots of fish spawn, baskets of gleaming fruit or haystacks of washing collected from the nearest town, women quarrelling, blind dervishes singing about Allah while they slap their shrivelled bellies—even, at one point, a group of men dressed as women, with full equipment of nose-rings, shawls, bangles and an obsessed and sexy look glazing their sad eyes. One escapes too, from the interminable inquisition of the “inter”: “Sir, you look very young. May I enquire what is your occupation?” “May I, sir, be so curious as to learn the circumstances under which you parted with your left eye-tooth? A nut? And eaten at Christmas? May I, sir, presume to enquire what variety of nut?” And so on until your benign torturer descends, expressing the hope that he will meet you for further discussion in the Here-after.

But the worst hazards of all are at the stations themselves. First because, under a new system introduced to “tighten up efficiency”, no station enquiry office can tell you about trains outside his district—even though the border may be no more than a few miles away. Secondly, because, travelling as I did at the time of the summer marriage fever and holiday recess,

SAINT ON THE MARCH

the long-distance expresses are full of wedding parties and of clerks and soldiers heading west from Calcutta or south from Delhi on their annual leaves and, once the stationmaster has received the "train full" notice, he must, in order to avoid a repetition of the Black Hole of Calcutta, refuse to allow new passengers to board. Wayside stations thus come to resemble the scene of a massacre; strewn like corpses across the platform, the rejected passengers sleep patiently until they can be accommodated.

Braving all this, I travelled from Gaya to Rai Bareilly in the centre of the United Provinces at the beginning of May. I had been directed there from the *Bhoodan* headquarters near Benares, for I wanted to see something of the land-distribution which had started in the wake of Vinoba's land-collection tour eighteen months before.

The provincial towns of north India are not prepossessing, and Rai Bareilly is certainly no exception. The bazaar crawling with flies, the lopsided advertisements on peeling shacks (according to the posters, all Indian women and babies are as fair-skinned as Swedes), the sweets piled in pyramids within a few inches of a heap of road-sweepings, the chipped benches round blackened tea-stalls and the chain of nauseous and choking smells—how disgusting in India are all untraditional things. No doubt we would find the condition of eighteenth-century London, its open sewers running with dead dogs, scum and cabbage stalks, equally revolting. For it is not long since the West acquired any tradition of urban hygiene. But what surprises one in India is the paradox between this public filth and the intense personal cleanliness of even the poorest peasant. Perhaps the paradox is more apparent than real. I remembered a conversation on handkerchiefs that I had had recently at Bodh Gaya. Someone had asked me how we Westerners could possibly tolerate such a revolting habit as blowing our noses into scraps of dirty linen. I replied that it seemed more hygienic for other people than did the Indian habit of expectoration. Oh, yes, he replied, but much

COAXING THE FLAME

less hygienic for oneself. Such an attitude is all very well in villages where there is room to breathe—and spit—and where discarded rubbish is rapidly scavenged by goats. But in towns it is less satisfactory.

I found the *Bhoodan* office in Rai Bareilly at the back of a dusty courtyard where human life seemed to have been reduced to stupor by the heat. Its one occupant was snoring hard beneath a turban of wet bath-towels. On the walls were a portrait of Vinoba hung with a fly-blown garland and three photographs of glaciers in the Canadian Rockies cut from *Life* magazine.

Tapped politely on the shoulder, the head merely rolled sideways, and snored louder than ever.

When I banged the door, it returned to its previous position, settled the towels on its face without opening its eyes and folded hands comfortably across its chest.

I have never accepted the Oriental theory that patience is the supreme virtue, so, taking the head firmly by both ears, I gave it a prolonged tweak. But it merely brushed a hand across its temple as if unsettling a fly and continued to sleep.

It was about an hour before it surfaced. "Ah! So you must be being the Englishman we are told to expect." And it wore a complacent grin of the "so-at-last-you've-turned-up" variety. "You might be going to village of Arkha to see distribution works there? It is only one half an hour away to village of Arkha. You get down at station"—I have forgotten the name—"and village of Arkha is only one mile from station." In fact, the village of Arkha was eight miles from the station and the total journey took four hours. It was dark before I stumbled into the courtyard of the *zamindar's* house, where the *Bhoodan* party was staying.

India has an extraordinary capacity for lifting one from the depths of despair and disgust to dizzy heights of enthusiasm and inspiration. It is indeed part of its astonishing charm. My limbs had almost vaporised with fatigue: an upholstered armchair, like the memory of hamburger steak to a starving

SAINT ON THE MARCH

man, seemed a vision of paradise. There were no upholstered armchairs in the courtyard of Ras Bihari Lal's house; only the inevitable circle of wooden bunks with the members of the *Bhoodan* party, Ras Bihari himself and two Government officers seated on top, and the huge house, with its carriage portico and trellised battlements, a gaunt and imposing backdrop in the twilight. Yet within a few moments of arrival I had forgotten my tiredness and was poring over a cloth map of the village on which the plots of land given to *Bhoodan* were being marked in blue chalk.

The man responsible for my rapid psychological transformation was Srikannto, the leader of the *Bhoodan* party, who rose from his wooden bunk as if it was a throne, greeted me with a regal gesture and enquired my name. I told him. They had not been expecting me, but that did not matter. "Let's call him Tensing," someone suggested, for India is very proud of the Sherpa who climbed Everest.

"No," said Srikannto, "No. He shall be Tan Singh Bhai—Brother Tan Singh. Tan Singh was a great singer at the Court of Akbar. And, having the name he has, our guest shall be a poet and not a mountaineer." So Tan Singh Bhai for twenty-four hours I remained.

I asked Srikannto how much land had been distributed so far out of the 500,000 acres which had been collected in this Province. Forty thousand, he told me.

"Is that all?" I said in surprise.

"Oh, but it's twice as much as has been distributed in the whole of the rest of the country put together. The difficulty, Tan Singh, is workers. We had hoped that village committees would be capable of dealing with the distribution, but except in a very few cases such committees could not be trusted to be impartial. And now all the collection parties in the United Provinces have been switched on to distribution and we only collect land if it is offered to us at our distribution meetings."

"You mean that new land is offered without your asking for it?"

COAXING THE FLAME

"Oh, yes. We get as much new land as we want in every village. Land-collection is no longer the problem. Distribution needs greater patience and much more time. India wants 100,000 full-time *Bhoodan* workers, and we only have 1,000." Meanwhile Srikantho seemed to be trying to fill the gap. It was long past midnight before he had finished marking out the plots on his cloth map, and as he did so he talked of the work they were doing.

Every peasant who received land must sign an undertaking not to resell it for ten years. If he sublet or failed to utilise the land himself, it would be redistributed by the *Bhoodan* committee which was now being set up in each village. No, in spite of the long wait, they had so far had no case of a landlord trying to revoke the gift deed that he had made before. On the contrary, they sometimes found that public opinion had exerted a subtle pressure during the gap and that the landlords now came and offered better land as a substitute for what they had previously given. There had been one disappointment, though. Landlords had been expected to continue to cultivate the land that they had given to *Bhoodan* until it was distributed, and to give its produce to the village. Such an ideal had proved well beyond the limits of human altruism, and the nearest approach that a few landlords had made was in not cultivating the land at all. Most, however, had continued to cultivate it.

We did not eat until the work was finished at 00.15 hours. Having existed since Benares on nothing but oranges, I had reached a stage of suspended hunger. It is a state which seems to inhibit the lower centres of the cerebral cortex, flooding one with noble "oceanic" feeling and breaking the more prickly of the barbed-wire defences behind which we normally entrench our ego. As it is a state in which many Indians and most *Bhoodan* workers habitually live, I suspect that it may have at least some connection with their vast reserves of patience.

At dawn next morning, after prayers led with tuneless

SAINT ON THE MARCH

fervour by Srikannto, we started out to investigate the 800 acres which our host had given to *Bhoodan* and which lay some miles away on a raised plateau between two branching streams of the Ganges. The hamlets through which we passed were built under heavy-lidded mango groves, their cottages with deeply sloping tiled roofs, thick walls and verandas supported by decorated iron staves. Occasionally we met a villager astride a neat pony, or a farmer driving an ox wagon with string canopy and wheels cut from a large slice of tree trunk. But the keenest risers were the women, who were astir in every cottage, grinding an early morning spice or milking the family goat from swollen dugs that looked like a forked mango. As we passed we chanted the *Bhoodan* slogan:

In our village without land
No one *shall* be, no one *shall* be,

In our village poor and needy
No one *shall* be, no one *shall* be

Victory to India! Victory to Gandhi! Victory Vinoba!

Women and goats looked up a little startled.

Odd to see these heavy, voluminous mango trees quilted with shadow by the early sun. They were the kind of trees that usually went with rolling park-land and prosperous Georgian houses instead of this grey and snake-infested dust. Out of them the rays of the sun had struck a perfect cacophony of crows, peacocks, parakeets and sparrows. Is anything more lovely than this dawn light swelling like music through the vast and resonant sounding board of the Ganges plain?

We forded the river, broad but summer-shallow, carrying on our heads a bicycle, two spinning wheels, several sets of office files and all clothing except our underpants. The plateau was a dense scrub which the landlord had not cultivated for years. If not given to *Bhoodan* it would have reverted to the State. I asked Srikannto what advantage there was in *Bhoodan* handling such land. He admitted that a law had been passed to

COAXING THE FLAME

the effect that such waste lands could only be distributed to the landless. But this law was directly due to the work of *Bhoodan*; formerly such land was sold to the highest bidder. This particular area had been acquired for *Bhoodan* before the new law had been made. Besides, cleared by tractor, even this land could yield one rice crop a year, while the shrubs would sell at a good profit for thatching.

Irrigated, it could yield two crops.

But where would they find the tractors and the irrigation? Srikantho was full of optimism. The Government had just started a National Extension project in the area; these projects were part of the rural development scheme with which it is planned to cover the whole country in a decade. One of the National Extension officials would be at the distribution ceremony in the afternoon. If the villagers themselves volunteered to give their labour, the extension project might be able to supply the necessary material. Another thing: now that the distribution stage had been reached, Vinoba had started a movement for *sampattidan*, gift of wealth, in addition to *Bhoodan*, gift of land. The landlords were being asked to supply wells, bullocks, and improved seeds along with the land that they had made over so that the new proprietors could be set up in business. As it gathered momentum, the revolution through love touched not only the ownership of land, but every aspect of social and economic life as well.

To which village did the plateau belong? Peering at the only map which showed the village boundaries and which dated back to the time of the last British Emperor but three, the Rural Government officer decided that the plateau must have been under water at the time when the map was made. Then, pursing his lips with the air of a village Solomon, he announced that the deeper of the two streams should be taken to mark the village boundary and that he would thus award the land to whichever side could boast the shallower stream. Being the only swimmer in the party, I was charged to brave the unknown waters. We had seen a string of storks

SAINT ON THE MARCH

fording the first stream like dwarf farmers with hoes of crimson-tipped steel and from them we had known that humans, too would be safe: but here not even a crocodile broke the glassy and sinister expanse. I dipped and announced that the land belonged to the far village since the first stream was clearly the deeper. By such was the fate of Arkha village decided.

We now settled down on a sand dune for our breakfast and morning ablutions. I was much in demand to teach the breast stroke, and, in return, attempted to learn the "peacock" pose from Srikannto, who was doing his daily *yogi* dozen on the sand. My pupils were all, after a fashion, ploughing through the water by the time I had finished with them, but as a peacock I was a lamentable failure—being unable even to reach the necessary balance, let alone retain it. I admire the way that *yogi* both rests and exercises the body at the same time, but alas! the muscle-bound Westerner is past teaching. Breakfast consisted of *sattu*—coarse, sweetened flour—which we proceeded to mix with water from the river. When I protested that only a short way down-stream a herd of buffaloes could be seen taking an early morning bath, Srikannto gave me a look of pitying but humorous surprise. "This is the Ganges, Tan Singh Bhai. India's sacred mother. Ganges water is never polluted." And then, with a swift concession to the scientific age, "It's been tested in the laboratories. Some people believe that it's due to the speed of the current," but it was clear that he did not believe anything so prosaic.

Srikannto was soon leading us back over the river to inspect some "goat-land" which he was planning to milk from the landlord. The rest of us followed, twittering in feeble protest, since the sun was now nearing its zenith and we had been on our feet for five hours. But we took care that Srikannto should not hear our complaints—it was obvious that he would never support them. A superb and splendid figure, his head a mass of dark, wavy hair, his eyes and teeth flashing in a narrow, beak-nosed face, his loose, honey-coloured limbs hung with shorts,

COAXING THE FLAME

shirt and turban all woven from saffron homespun, Srikannto looked the very embodiment of negligent nobility. A Persian prince, perhaps, pictured by the miniaturist on a private hawk-ing expedition.

When we reached home at midday, he launched into a perfect fury of spinning: his wheel with its twin bobbins, whirring away like an epileptic bluebottle. But, looking round at the rest of us who had settled down to sleep, I could not help wondering what on earth *we* were all doing. In the third century B.C. the armies of the Indian kings were defeated by Alexander the Great largely because of the camp-followers who got in the way of the battle. The passion for camp-following persists. It is another form, perhaps, of "peonisation." Can *Bhoodan* grow out of it? Or does a refusal to organise give camp-following tacit encouragement?

The distribution took place that afternoon in the front room of the *Zamindar's* house beneath a row of hand-coloured ancestral photographs dressed in gold turbans and purple spats. In other parts of Hindu India the onlookers would have been amorous deities from the pantheon, but here Moslem rule had exerted a healthy and stalwart influence on the decrepit domestic architecture of the Hindus.

A drummer had been round the village and its neighbouring hamlets calling the villagers to the meeting and about fifty spare, scholarly looking figures now squatted on the veranda in front of us. Srikannto barked at them, hectoring but amused. "They don't hear if you speak too softly," he told me. "They are used to shouting at animals or across fields to wives and children."

"Vinoba never shouts," I put in.

"Vinoba's a saint," was Srikannto's laconic reply. Sensing the benign intention behind his bark, the villagers came crowding round. Srikannto was squatting behind a low table which he had barricaded with gift-deeds and maps. Now began the process of sorting out the landless.

"So you want land?"

SAINT ON THE MARCH

"Yes, if it pleases you, sir."

"And what will you do with the land when you have it?"

"Grow rice on it, sir."

"Do you grow good rice?"

"Sir, we have grown rice for Babu Ras Bihari since childhood."

"Do you float the seeds in water to separate the good from the bad?"

"Sir, we get fine crops."

"How many hundredweights do you grow on an acre?"

Obstinately: "Sir, we work well. Babu Ras Bihari knows that we neither steal nor drink."

"You must learn to use the *Japanese* method of rice-cultivation." Pointing to the National Extension officer by his side: "Hemanth Babu is here to help you learn these things." Hemanth Babu blinked and coughed intelligently. "Now, uncle, how many children do you have and where do you live?"

Normally, when all the evidence had been taken, the landless themselves would have been asked to select those most worthy to receive *Bhoodan* plots. But as it seemed that not all the landless had turned up to-day Srikanth retired with the *Zamindar*, the National Extension officer, the Government Records officer and the head man of the village to make the decision. They returned surprisingly soon. Two acres of bad and one of good for each landless family present and the "goat land" which we had visited to be set aside for communal grazing. This left a considerable quantity of land still not distributed. I learned that the same thing had happened the day before. Only a fraction of the landless had bothered to turn up for the meeting and no more than one-third of the land had been given away.

In a few moments the ceremony of distribution began. Each peasant pressed an inked thumbprint on to the gift deed that was to be lodged with the Records Officer and the *Zamindar* handed over the peasant's own copy of the draft he was

COAXING THE FLAME

drawing from the *Zamindar's* acreage. Then Srikannto marked the forehead of both donor and recipient with the auspicious red *tilak* and the peasant bent down to take the dust from his benefactor's feet.

The landlord had announced *sampattidan* of two pairs of bullocks and one-third the cost of two tube wells, if the Government would supply the rest of the money necessary and the villagers were willing to give their labour. He was a quiet and unostentatious man and these gifts were whispered modestly to Srikannto and not blatantly brandished in order to bolster his prestige. A keen and careful farm organiser, he was ploughing back the yearly compensation he received for the loss of his *zamindari* into agriculture. He had already bought two "Wisconsin" milling machines operated by petrol, and a motor pump for drawing water from the river, which in two years had raised his yield of rice per acre to two tons, four times that obtained by the villagers. A Government bull, bought partly with National Extension money, had, however, proved less successful. It had been intended for service of the local kine, who, owing to their poor breeding and feeding, were kept normally as mere yielders of manure and fuel (the Indian housewife likes nothing better than dried dung for her kitchen fire). But so overbearing was this enormous creature in his demands on his frail harem that, after a fortnight, he had to be quietly taken away.

The local development officer in charge of the National Extension project had a passion for long khaki pants and the English language. He personified, in fact, those features of the Government rural development scheme to which I had so often heard *Bhoodan* workers objecting. Not that they are prejudiced in any narrow way in matters of language or costume. But they cannot see how a development officer, who lives at a European level, clearly believes that life without tables and chairs is akin to barbarism and longs for the delights of the city, can do anything to bring about that moral revolution of which India's villages stand in need. Will not such leaders, they

SAINT ON THE MARCH

ask, transmit their own ideals to the villages in which they work and perpetuate the illusion that one cannot be educated without speaking English, sitting in armchairs and sporting khaki shorts? And is not India's prime need the nurture of her remnants of rural culture rather than their final destruction? The building up of efficiency, initiative, a new life with implements that fit the age-old pattern of the village and which the villager himself can understand and control? Some of what *Bhoodan* says about the Government projects may sound exaggerated, but there is no doubt that India's agricultural revolution is not solely, or even primarily, a matter of the acquisition of new techniques. The first condition of change is for the peasants to take their destinies into their own hands and to *will* change for themselves. The sloth of centuries has to be shaken off, otherwise new techniques taught by well-meaning outsiders will merely rust unused in the all-enveloping apathy of the Gangetic plain.

"Was *Bhoodan* shaking off the sloth?" I asked myself as Srikannto led the crowd of "grateful" new proprietors in a chant of slogans. The ceremony was touching. The peasants, clutching their gift-deeds, stood as sheepishly as prizewinners singing the school anthem to an end-of-term gathering of parents. But were they "in" *Bhoodan* in any real sense? Was not the evangelism, the change of heart, taking place among the "haves" rather than the "have-nots"? Were the peasants more than passive recipients of charity?

After those who had received land had dispersed, I obtained a partial answer to these questions. There were about ten other peasants still left, squatting voiceless and persistent on the veranda. They were not, as I suspected, mere mindless on-lookers hoping for some other crumb of entertainment—like those who leave their TV set on even when the screen is empty. They had come from the group of villages that Srikannto and his party had visited the day before. They had not attended yesterday's meeting in their own village because they could not help believing that there was a snag in the offer

COAXING THE FLAME

of free land and because, even if there wasn't, they could not see the point of accepting second-rate land when they hadn't the capital needed for putting it into commission. But the printed gift deeds (a "document," and one actually in hand, always enormously impresses) and the rumour of Government loans, new seeds and a pair of bullocks from the village landlord had changed their minds: and so here they were—after walking ten miles in the boiling sun—to see if there was anything left over for them.

Srikannto barked and they crept rather crestfallen across the veranda, like children who expect a well-merited scolding. Once more the patient, humorous inquisition began. Yes, I thought, the vast avalanche of rural India, inert and frozen for so long, had after all begun to shift.

In Hyderabad, where I went distributing with Lakshmi Bhai, the Deputy Minister of Education and the only woman in a high administrative post in the whole province, the avalanche was quite visibly on the quiver. Lakshmi Bhai is a child-widow who comes from the milkmaid caste, not far removed in fact from an "untouchable." Her rectangular jaw, eyes like boot-buttons and purposeful figure the shape of a cottage loaf amply betoken the force of character that has brought her to the top. What they do not at first reveal are the humour, the motherly charm and the shrewd candour packed close beneath the square mask of strength. As a Deputy Minister, Lakshmi Bhai's itinerary—accompanied, as the Press report said, "by Mrs. Tension the famous American journalist"—was mapped out in advance and lined by soldiers with rifles at the ready. She hated this fuss and made angry little movements of deprecation and despair as each fresh section of red carpet was unrolled. "What can I do?" she wailed. "I'm only a Deputy Minister. When I become a full Minister, then perhaps I shall be able to get things changed."

We were, at that moment, entering a village not long freed from Communist control, where the forest which bordered

SAINT ON THE MARCH

the lake to the south, once a tigers' paradise, had been burnt to the ground by the police in their search for terrorists. We arrived at a palatial *Zamindar's* house and were sat on tiger skin rugs and fed from gold plates and goblets of silver with an unending succession of fruits, *sherbets*, chutneys, sweets, six different kinds of curry and for me—as the only meat-eater of the party—a whole rabbit hunted and cooked as soon as my arrival was rumoured. Peering round the front gate the villagers gaped at us as if we were wild beasts found for the first time in a state of captivity.

After lunch we sat on the colonnaded veranda in huge mahogany armchairs. The garlands which had been slung round my neck on arrival were discharging a shower of insects down my spine. I was hot, overfed and thoroughly uncomfortable. Suddenly Lakshmi Bhai rose from the seat next to mine and walked over to the gate. Putting her arms round two of the children, she made them sing her a local song (in India every district, almost every village, still has its traditional music). Then she asked if there were any professional musicians in the village and was told that there were two. "Fetch them," she said in an imperious but grandmotherly voice, and the children at once obeyed. The singers arrived, long-haired and mawkish, with a pair of cymbals and a lute whose stem was carved like the prow of a Viking ship. Then, tearing off her garlands and angrily waving away the fleet of jeeps that waited to waft her along the dust-white roads, she set out for the village meeting flanked on either side by the singers. Police, landlords, military, myself and children were caught in a surprised jumble behind.

Whether due to her brilliant decision to hire singers, or whether to some arbitrary monolithic quality of her own, Lakshmi Bhai certainly drew the crowds. In each village she set the musicians to work while she interviewed the elders. The village drifted silently in and sat, babies astride its hip, listening. Then Lakshmi Bhai emerged and in her clipped, quick way asked that all speeches of welcome be cut down to three

COAXING THE FLAME

minutes so that she could settle austere to business. In one village, an elderly widow who had been left 100 acres for life, wanted to give them to Lakshmi. She came and squatted at her feet, shrivelled right arm held in statuesque generosity, strands of grey hair falling over shrunken cheeks. But soon her fat nephew had caught up with her and stood by her side with a smile of oily tolerance. "Women are good, but they don't understand the law," he said. "I have to consult my brothers. Great-aunt has only a life tenancy of this land. It belongs to the rest of us by entail."

"Have the rest of you given any land yet?" chipped in Lakshmi Bhai.

The nephew folded his palms under his chin. "Ah, yes, yes. Indeed we have, honoured Mother. Some of our best lands we have given indeed to Saint Vinoba for the poor." His smile was meant to express a happy support for *Bhoodan*, combined with a reluctant confession of the claims of common sense. It succeeded in being merely crafty. It was just the smile I had always expected from landlords who wanted to avoid being fleeced.

At the next village a mother rose from the crowd which was dispersing after distribution, and accused her son of not having fulfilled his promise to give. She vowed there and then to starve slowly to death and to forgo all expenses at her own funeral if his promise was not kept. She spoke in the stilted and sonorous tones of a Greek chorus. In India tragedy has not yet been reduced to the level of a tactless accident, and people still move in the tragic as if in a natural element. In the confusion, I was not quite sure who her son was, or whether, indeed, he was present at all. But ten of his best acres were made over, fresh gift-deeds were sent for, maps had to be brought out and the village committee recalled.

Altogether in two days we visited six villages and rid ourselves of 3,500 acres. But my impressions are muddled. It was at Bashirabad, I think, that I was almost stifled in the village Post Office. At Chautpelli that I was expected to speak, at

SAINT ON THE MARCH

Kutur that I was hoisted on top of the Jugganauth chariot on which the image of Krishna as Lord of the Universe is taken for a yearly ride—whether this was so that the crowd could get a better view of the “famous American woman journalist” or whether so that I could get a better view of them I never knew. I remember looking out across the huge expanse of flat, brown fields intersected every 10 yards by the mud *bunds* and imagining them the foundation of some vast excavated city.

After each meeting we were surrounded by landless or near landless who had hoped for land, but who had some subsidiary cottage occupation, such as weaving, mat-making or the rolling of cigarettes, and who had therefore, for the moment, not been given land. They held out their hands in stately and silent supplication as Lakshmi, goddess of Fortune, passed on to her next village. At one point there was even a girl of fourteen who begged to be allowed a plot for herself. Compared to the Rai Bareilly district in the United Province, this was a fertile area and every acre gave a lifetime's security to at least one person.

Through it all Lakshmi moved imperturbably onwards like a well-ballasted ship in a rough sea. Odd how the mere sight of her seemed to have given the village women courage to drop their habitual reserve and to come right out into the centre of the fray. Yet she had time every few minutes to seek me out with her beady eyes, anxiously making sure that I was comfortable or that I was resting, bathing, eating, sleeping, changing as the occasion demanded.

That evening the villagers celebrated the distribution by staging a play outside the *Zamindar's* front gate. Waiting in the seat of honour between the *Zamindar* and Lakshmi Bhai, I asked our host whether he expected to lose a lot of land when the Hyderabad Government put their new ceiling regulation into force. “I shall lose none,” he replied with a broad grin. I wondered whether he was showing tactful poverty in the face of an accredited Minister, afraid lest he had already fatally

COAXING THE FLAME

boosted his reputation as a man of property by feeding us off gold and silver plate. But that was not the reason for his modesty. "I shall give all my surplus to *Bhoodan*," he continued.

"And forgo the Government compensation?" I asked.

"Oh, that! Many of us landlords would consider it an insult to have our property seized by Government," he replied. "Why, even the poorest peasant would assume that we must be no better than criminals." Such is the competitive pride of reputation that *Bhoodan* stimulates.

As the only sign of the play was a shabby backcloth depicting a lurid sunset, I improved the starry hour by finding out what my neighbours thought to be the chief agricultural reforms needed in the village before the best use could be made of their *Bhoodan* lands. First, of course, came India's age-long cry of "Water." One shallow well could irrigate $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres. It costs about £75. If no other irrigation was available, every village would need at least 200 such wells in order to be able to grow two crops of rice—a summer crop as well as an autumn one. Next came the need for natural manuring—the use of cow-dung on the fields instead of the kitchen fire and the conservation of human as well as animal waste. Then rice cultivation by the *Japan*y method, in which individual seedlings (instead of bunches of plants) are hand-set symmetrically 8 inches apart, as in Japan. This needs twice as much labour as the usual Indian method, but the crop produced can be as much as fifteen times the Indian average per acre and it is grown from ten times less seed. Next in importance came the question of stock improvement and the proper feeding of cattle. At the moment cows and goats merely scratch round the stubble, no fodder crops are grown and there is no grass pasturage. Fodder crops are not only an urgent necessity for the cattle; they will improve the whole complex of agriculture as well. I pointed out that it was the sowing of clover which, paradoxically, secured Egypt its prominent position among the world's cotton-growers. But the Indian farmer is still almost totally blind to

SAINT ON THE MARCH

the benefit of crop rotation. Finally, I rode my own pet hobby horse, afforestation. To-day's deserts are yesterday's forests—Nature has her own punishment for our greedy and tyrannical murder of trees, and the loss of her trees is probably the most important single factor responsible for the erosion of India's soil. Trees hold moisture, prevent top-soil being washed away, and their leaves, when shed, restore natural fertility to the earth.

These points seem simple enough. But in India each one means a revolution in peasant habits and thinking. No one can be forced to become a good farmer at the point of a gun, however hard the Communists may try. The peasant must want progress for himself, and be prepared to risk new experiments in order to achieve it. When one remembers that the average income of a farming family in India is roughly thirty times lower than that of an equivalent family in the United States, that a Negro share-cropper from Alabama would, in an Indian village, belong to the upper economic crust and that scarcely one Indian farmer in ten can read or write, one realises how immense is the task with which Indian agriculture is faced. Pulling oneself up by one's own boot-strings is always a difficult accomplishment. To do it without boots needs a near miracle. But *Bhoodan* inspires faith in miracles.

That night the three of us, ex-milkmaid, ex-Westerner, leathery ex-landlord, knew that what had been lit in the Hyderabad countryside might gutter ominously, but would not now go out. *Bhoodan* made it possible, too, that it would never again be fanned by jealousy and hatred into a conflagration. But could *Bhoodan* work fast enough? Could it switch easily from moral idealism to practical farming? Could it effectively harness the goodwill that it had already won? My companions did not shirk the difficulties that lay before them.

"We need every hand who may be wanting to help us," was how Lakshmi Bhai phrased it. "Our works are beginning, not ending."

It was past midnight before we woke up to the fact that

COAXING THE FLAME

there was still no sign of actors in front of the stained back-cloth and that the storm lanterns used as proscenium lights were running out of paraffin before the play had even begun. On making vigorous enquiry we were told that some members of the cast were still rehearsing, others being persuaded to take part. But our informants were optimistic that the performance would eventually start. Their optimism was justified. The play started about half an hour later. It was the story of Chand Bibi, the Moslem Princess who led an insurrection against the British. The female parts were taken by village boys, as once in Elizabethan England. Court magnificence was suggested by the liberal use of bedraggled peacock plumes. A prompter read the lines very audibly from behind the back-cloth with the tonelessness of someone delivering a grocery order by 'phone. They were then repeated word for word in mincing and stylised accents by the actors. By the time the play was finished there were only six spectators left in the dusty and starlit auditorium. And, of these six, I, at least, was asleep.

TWELVE

A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES

IN MAY, NIGHT JOURNEYS, third-class, are almost unbelievable to those who have experienced them and certainly indescribable to those who haven't. Normally you hang on the steps of the compartment, trying to persuade fellow passengers not to push you off on to the tracks: not that they could help it even if they did; it is simply that those inside are packed as tight as dynamite in a high explosive. The stars and the cool wind are so refreshing, however, that you greet the morning less fatigued than when you half-boarded the train. From Rai Barelli I was lucky, I found a seat. But it must be admitted that about ten other people found it too, the same seat. We sat in each other's laps like those lecture-hall chairs that stack in a neatly fitting pile, the carriage's standing passengers leaning on us for comfort and support. Peering through a tangle of limbs, I saw an elderly woman lying on the floor. Her head had been jammed at right angles against a steel trunk, her legs, after steering their way through an undergrowth of limbs belonging to other people, ended in a basket containing a pumpkin, several pounds of rice and a sleeping baby, which, one assumed, belonged to herself. Her left side—before she was forced into a sudden, right-angled turn by our bench—was up against the toilet door, which could, consequently, only be opened if she moved. But, of course, she couldn't. Besides, one would have hesitated to disturb her. For, like almost everyone else in the carriage, she was sound asleep. I passed the night divided between longing to relieve myself and wonder at the Indian capacity for slumber.

My destination was Orai. It was the nearest I could get by rail to Mangroth, the first village in India to give all that it

A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES

possessed to *Bhoodan*. Orai consists of a series of concrete shacks built round an enormous bowl of dust. There were no roads or recognised tracks across this arena. Lorries, jeeps, bicycles and bullock carts merely careered in all directions, leaving in their wake such a continuous and unsettled cloud that one could never see across from side to side. I had planned on spending no more than a day in Mangroth, since I was already well behind schedule owing to missed connections, and I did not want to lose the express that ran through Orai that night. I was told that a jeep would take me out to Mangroth village at 10 a.m.

At 1 p.m. I enquired what had happened. The jeep, so they said, had gone off to a wedding but was expected any minute. Besides surely it would be a mistake to go in this heat? By 3 p.m. the jeep had mysteriously turned into a truck and was now delayed delivering a load of petrol. By 4.30 we were negotiating for a bullock cart and by six had practically found one. But at this point I protested, pointing out that my train left Orai in another two and a half hours and that whatever happened I was not prepared to miss it. I had better give Mangroth the slip. I was then eagerly assured that Mangroth was no more than a few miles away and that I would be back in time for the train. Besides, the two English-speaking people there were expecting me; it would not be courteous to disappoint them.

At 6.15 I started to trundle off through the dust-bin of Orai, urging the driver to twist his oxen's tails in order to keep them at a trot. We reached an attractive village, heavily shaded, with curved, hilly streets and two storeys to every house. Mangroth? My driver, whose smile struck that wonderful peasant balance between humour and servility, waved a postponing and propitiatory hand.

I resigned myself till the next village.

But where was the next village? After climbing a narrow defile, cut in rock, I saw with a sinking heart a huge scrub-covered plateau and no sign of human habitation as far as the

SAINT ON THE MARCH

eye could reach. Instead, flocks of partridges had brought out their young to enjoy the first breath of sunset and small Indian rock-doves greeted us with their curious Indianised coo (how quickly the unprotected wild life of the Indian plains would have been massacred had the humans not been such strict vegetarians). At last by the rim of the plateau a superb village rose up against the gathering dusk, the only north Indian village I had seen with such a dramatic outline. "Mangroth! Mangroth!" I cried excitedly. But my driver turned round, licked his moustache and shook his head.

Now we had passed the village. It was dark and we were slipping uneasily over a movable Bailey bridge spanning the River Bettwa. A wedding was approaching. The groom was on top of an elephant holding a rush torch, and behind him an unruly retinue of camels and bullock carts, the animals decorated with gold braid and embroidered coats to cover their humps of fat. A brass band was braying in comic parody of a Sousa march. The lights and shouts and music frightened our poor oxen out of their wits and the driver and I strenuously tried to dissuade them from plunging into the river. At the back of the wedding party the bullocks clattering downhill to the river, did not realise the hold-up. There was an accident and in a moment panic had spread: wagons creaked, humans cursed, women shrieked, the elephant alarmingly shook himself, threatening to swamp the entire bridge, and above it all the brass band battered away, madly oblivious of calamity. It was like a film set of some Old Testament battle. I looked at my watch and realised that my train was just about due. Why not assume that it was going to be three hours late, like every other long-distance train I had caught in the past week, and head back to Orai again? Impossible, for by some miracle we had now reached the far side of the bridge, leaving a large portion of the wedding party, including the bridegroom's elephant, still stranded in midstream. Our return was blocked. Helpless victims of wedding fever, we were condemned to Mangroth.

A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES

But even after this the village continued to elude us. It was some way off the lane, infesting a barren, boulder-strewn hill. Even by daylight it was not visible behind its rocks and cacti until one was only a couple of hundred yards off. And at night, after we had passed the wedding party, jackals were the only locals from whom we could have asked the way. It was 9.30 p.m. before we arrived.

Creaking across the rocks, we tethered the oxen in the yard of Diwan Singh, the landlord who had given all he had to *Bhoodan* and started the village landslide. He was one of the two inhabitants who expected me and who spoke English. The village began to assemble round us, curious but discreet. But it was not long before I learnt that Diwan Singh was away on an unexpected family visit. Then what about the *Bhoodan* worker in the village, the other person said to know that I was coming? Ah, he had gone on his annual leave. He wouldn't be back for three weeks. There were as many as ten others in the village who could read and write, but none other besides Babu Diwan Singh and Babu Ram Kinka who knew English. Then all my time, energy, patience had gone for nothing and I need never have stopped off my hard-won train into the dust of Orai.

Hard as I tried to control myself, the fantastic chain of incompetence and misinformation proved too much. I cursed, I banged my fist on a table which had mysteriously appeared out of the darkness. I strode up and down beating my forehead, and, finally, I spat bile at the driver, as the only available target. Why hadn't he told me how long it would take? Why had he ever agreed to come? Why didn't he drive with horses instead of bullocks?

The anxious smile with which he greeted my diatribe brought me to my senses. Of course, no one could understand a word I was saying. Instead of regarding my wrath as righteous and well-deserved, they probably thought I was suffering from sun-stroke. I bit my tongue and attempted to suggest a mood more of sorrow than of anger. To be caten alive by stomach

SAINT ON THE MARCH

ulcers and furies is the fate of anyone who tries to do things in India according to plan. The fate is intolerable enough by itself, without two dozen pairs of eyes being there to witness it. "Go away, please!" I muttered in broken Hindi. "It's no use. I can't talk to you. I can't talk Hindi. I can only talk Bengali."

It was then that the miracle happened.

A voice at the back said: "*Ami-o Bangla kotha jani*—I speak Bengali too." It was about as improbable as expecting to hear Welsh in a hamlet on the Yorkshire moors. In the minute of silence that followed I surfaced up from despair like a sleeper from a dream of suffocation. How rapidly India can telescope our transformations of mood. We are in God's hands, although we may not know it, and that fleeting instant when we *do* know it is extraordinarily sweet. Three seconds before I had been dreading the next twenty-four hours. I now looked forward to them.

The character of Sitaram, my Bengali interpreter, had more than a little to do with the change. Even before I had answered his first Bengali sentence he was at my side calling me *Dada*, Elder Brother, as if he really believed it. But not only did he treat me with the respectful attention due to an older relative, his gentle eyes shone in unspoken amusement at the relative's well-known failings. Sitaram, in fact, was a standing rebuke to ill-temper. He was also a mine of information, although he had only come to the village a few days before me, having been engaged to revive spinning and weaving among the women. Nearly every house in the village still had its own loom, the base and treadle standing in a hollow built in the mud floor, but the craft had been abandoned owing to the competition of mill cloth, which sold at less than half the price. Now the Government of the United Provinces had agreed to subsidise hand-woven cloth to the extent of 5 annas in the rupee (about $\frac{1}{3}$ rd), and, besides, most of the material produced in Mangroth would be distributed to the inhabitants themselves through the village store. So battens were swinging once more and spindles had begun to hum.

A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES

Other crafts and trades in the village had also taken a new lease. Next morning I saw the leather-curiers up early hanging carcasses of oxen over huge vats (they had died from natural causes, so Sitaram was eager to inform me) and supplying the shoe-makers across the way. The cobblers in their turn used this for two oddly contrasted types of footwear—sandals, the sole a good one and a half inches thick and large as a hippo's muzzle, and pointed Turkish slippers delicately embroidered with gold thread. Then there were tailors, potters, silversmiths all working away to supply the big co-operative store that had opened in Diwan Singh's courtyard.

By Indian standards, Mangroth, as I soon saw, was thoroughly ordinary in its composition and background. It was barren, isolated, untouched by more than the merest rumour of the outside world. Most of its inhabitants had never even seen the railway, let alone travelled on it, aeroplanes crossing the empyrean above were more familiar to them than motor cars or bicycles. The village had not been invaded by missionaries, politicians, Communists or foreign armies, and isolation had kept their traditional way of life in deep-freeze. In fact, a *Mofussil* village much like 400,000 others.

The twenty-seven villages in Orissa which have given all their possessions to *Bhoodan* are inhabited by *Harijans* of the same sub-caste, who are either fishermen or cultivators and who already regard their village as an extension of their own family unit. But Mangroth was a mixture of all castes, India in miniature. Until Vinoba came on April 24th, 1952, these castes lived separate lives; inhabiting their own sections of the village, eating and marrying entirely among themselves, drinking from their own wells. Diwan Singh, the headman and the village's chief landlord, who looked like a Hebrew patriarch, belied his appearance with his progressive views. He had long lost all ideas of caste and exclusiveness and was a patron of the poor. When Vinoba made his usual appeal, Diwan Shatrughana Singh gave him all that he had—houses, trees, barns, wells, clothing and every single acre of land. "Do

SAINT ON THE MARCH

with them what you like," he said. "There is nothing in the whole earth I can call my own. All belongs to God." Vinoba handed the gift over to a village committee and a fortnight later the village held a public meeting, at which every family except for one smallholder and one *chamach* (leather-curer), decided to follow the example of their headman. There was one problem, however, the second largest landlord lived outside Mangroth in the nearby village of Reonta. He had not been present at the meeting. The villagers approached him, pointing out that since all Mangroth's landless labourers would now be able to cultivate their own plots, he would find it difficult to obtain labour there for the tilling of his Mangroth land. The landlord agreed to hand this land over to the village committee—much to the chagrin of his own village, where he had not given a single acre.

Not that even now life was to be "one perpetual progress smooth and bright." In the first place, the villagers disliked the *Bhoodan* worker who tried to make them redeem their pledge. The men started to argue about the theory behind it. Weren't they really *all* landless now, as the neighbouring villages maliciously suggested? But the women—and Diwan Singh—stood firm. They had given their word to a saint. They would surely be punished if they broke it. When the next *Bhoodan* worker came a year later, he offered to return the gift deeds. His offer was refused.

How was the reborn village to be run? First of all, everyone was expected to engage in manual labour and to "worship Shrama Devata, the goddess of work." This included even the twenty or so families, fourteen of whom were Brahmins, who had been brought up to regard agriculture as degrading and had been forbidden by orthodox religion to touch the plough. Previously the Brahmins had farmed their land through the employment of labour, but now the labour would no longer be readily available and their own hands would have to grow accustomed to toil. They were parasites who had voluntarily cancelled their own licence for laziness. Imagine City magnates

A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES

suddenly asking to sow corn and you have a measure of the social and psychological change involved.

This, of course, is "Communism"—Communism as it might still be if we had the courage to grow to spiritual maturity. Communism plus so many other things, including God, that it looks remarkably like the society described in the Acts of the Apostles: "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul; neither said any of them that aught of the things he possessed was his own; but they had all things in common. . . . Neither was any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the prices of the things that were sold and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and the distribution was unto every man according as he had need."

Vinoba has never believed in the mathematical equality of human beings. "We are equal," he says; "just as the five fingers of the hand are equal. Equal in our usefulness and importance, but not always in our size or strength or capacity." Now that the 800 acres of Mangroth had all been vested in the village community, they were re-distributed again to the villagers in amounts which varied with each family's capacity and need. Diwan Singh, who had given all of his 100 acres to the Community received back 40, since he was known to be the most efficient farmer in the village. While at the other end of the scale came the potters, shoemakers and silversmiths who, since they had a trade already, only received small plots. All the land, however, whether given to a *Harijan* or to Diwan Singh, was to be held on trust from the village, which could review and change the distribution whenever the need arose. Land-ownership in fact should be determined by needs of efficiency and bonds of mutual confidence rather than by any permanent legal right.

The Village Committee asked the new proprietors if they wished to form a collective farm. Thirty-two of the *Harijan* families—and Diwan Singh as well—agreed to do so, but the other seventy-one families preferred to continue farming as

SAINT ON THE MARCH

separate units. The collective was called *Parivar*—the family. Its members received no wages—only food and clothing from the common pool. All farmers, whether private or collective, traded their surplus produce at the village store in return for clothing, household articles and the use of the dispensary and newly established school.

A classless society, Vinoba says, is both undesirable and impossible. There will always be division of function round which different economic interests adhere. Yet class harmony is possible here and now. Its introduction is a psychological and moral problem as much as an organisational one. It depends on recognising the law of love as part of the natural social order. In Mangroth the final sanction for collective farmer, landlord, shoemaker, Brahmin or *Harijan* was no longer their own needs or those of their families, caste or class, but the needs of the village to which they all belonged.

Not that Mangroth is a paradise of green in the surrounding dust and rock. If it is it would be as unreal and unconvincing as those demonstration farms run by the Indian Government on which disproportionate millions have been lavished. What use is sugar-cane 10 feet high if it costs Rs. 5 a pound to grow? No; Mangroth is a rickety huddle of huts straggling halfway up a ravine and down again. The drinking water tastes as flat as if it was just off the boil, although it comes from a depth of 1,200 feet. The women have to drag the well ropes laboriously hundreds of yards downhill as they draw up each single bucket. Monkeys feast on crops which at the best of times are as sparse as a Chinaman's beard. The rains, when they come, scatter away down the ravine with no tanks or lakes yet dug to hold them. Even the wooden plinths that edge the steep gulleys at the back of the village and have been put there to prevent the soil from crumbling away, look pitifully frail.

Even Mangroth's best land produces no more than one crop a year, while half of its 800 acres are still uncultivable—a wilderness of scrub and stone. The villagers have already

A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES

moved over the scrub, backs bent, baskets on their hips, picking off what they could. They have even had a Government tractor to try and uproot the scrub. But it needs irrigation, fencing and special manuring as well before it will bear even a meagre crop. Then there is the heat. Mangroth was originally a fortress built by a Hindu rajah during Moghul invasions. It grew into a sizeable town, only to be razed to the ground, 100 years ago at the time of the Mutiny. The mud huts rose from the ruins. That is why it is still stuck sunwards on its spit of rock without the grove of trees that usually shades even the poorest village. Trailing up and down the precipitous and dusty village streets, I seemed to be gradually liquefying. When I sat down to make notes my hand left a damp, ink-smudging trail as I wrote. Even the effort to remember what I had just seen was almost more than I could face.

We were sitting in the Reading Room, one of the courtyards of Diwan Singh's fine house that now belonged to the village. It consisted of a wireless and rusty gramophone, two week-old Hindi newspapers and a librarian who was the oldest of the literate villagers. We were on a wooden bench, which burnt right through my linen shorts and which had been pushed against the wall (the veranda was stacked with bins of co-operative produce) to squeeze out a last drop of shade as the ravenous sun hovered at its meridian. Dharam Pal, scion of the most important Brahmin family in the village, who was responsible for the co-operative shop, was explaining the system of barter which they had set up. When I complained of the heat, he laughed. "Yes; it is hot this year. That means good rains. But it hasn't reached midsummer yet. You should be here in a month's time—just before the rains start."

Dharam Pal was a fine, straight man with brawny arms and slender hips, a boy's unwrinkled forehead and the pointed nose and sensual mouth of an artist. He talked rapidly and had the nearest thing to a belly laugh that I had yet heard in India. An aristocrat who had never lost touch with the soil. When Vinoba came, Dharam Pal left with him, asking to be allowed

SAINT ON THE MARCH

to carry the saint's suitcase on his head like a coolie. I should imagine that in spite of this handicap he was one of the only followers able to keep up the pace. Now he was urging Sitaram and me upstairs to see the rooms where the grain was stored. I clambered up, wincing when I put my hand on the sizzling stone balustrade. Round the balcony overlooking the courtyard were a series of delightful little rooms, like cells in some elegant Renaissance monastery. Every grille window was decorated with an arabesque of plaster. But each of these rooms was filled now with a dusty sea of wheat or rice or lentils lapping the window-sills and on the balcony itself there were strings of sandals, piles of soap and bundles of clothing—all made in the village and waiting for distribution as each family needed them.

The shop and the Village Committee, so Dharam Pal told us, now met all the needs of the members of the collective and also any extras required by the rest of the village for funerals, weddings or festivals. They were also responsible for maintaining the village children who passed into the High School at Orai, where they had to live in lodgings during the term. In the two years since the "rebirth," the moneylender—that scourge of Indian village life almost as deadly as drought or infected water—had scarcely shown his odiously fat face. By lending the villagers money to pay off their debts interest free, the Committee had freed them from the crippling burden of loans taken out at wedding or funeral time at a *monthly* interest often as high as 15 or 20 per cent.

Next door was the main courtyard of Diwan Singh's house, and although he had been given this back for his own use by the Village Committee, everyone else seemed to have the run of it as well. Diwan Singh was away, but one of his ground-floor rooms had been opened up for me to sleep in. Yet another was given over to the dispensary, also run by the Village Committee, and staffed by a pretty *Harijan* girl, complete with a miniature gold flower stuck like a wart in the side of her nose, and heavy silver anklets. She had been sent to Sevagram,

A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES

Gandhi's old village centre, for training and kept her jars and bottles in military precision on their shelves. The courtyard itself appeared to be a public meeting-ground, the great high iron studded doors, like those that guard the portcullis of baronial castles, being permanently open and an assortment of wooden beds and benches ranged round the village's largest, and almost its only tree.

In the afternoon when the air seemed on the brink of explosion from the shattering pressure of heat, Sitaram and Dharam Pal curled up for a comfortable snooze on the steps of the shop full in the blazing sun. They left me in tactful solitude inside, my head propped against a sack of peppers with a brass-jugful of water for comfort by my side. I could not sleep. I sat taking frequent swigs from the jug and wiping my forehead after the exertion of each drink.

In the evening we stood on the ravine holding the first tender threads of the breeze. This was where the Rajah's fortress had once been built and fragments of shaped stone still lay about on the ground. I lifted my face to the north like a castaway drinking rain. The next minute I was leaping from boulder to boulder. But the exultation was short-lived. I was soon lathered with sweat. I had forgotten that at sunset one perspires more than ever, since the moisture that falls from the cooling air vaporises again over the still-simmering earth and the human body, no longer able to rid itself of sweat, liquefies in still greater discomfort. It was that air—steaming up once more over the terrestrial frying pan—that blurred the landscape into a blue Turneresque haze. I stumbled limply back to where Sitaram and Dharam Pal were sitting. It was time to start back for Orai, I said. I must look for my bullocks.

My friends seemed uncomfortable. They had thought I was staying. I shook my head. I must be back in good time to catch my train. But I couldn't go, they said. Hadn't I heard that Dharam Pal's sister was getting married and that I was invited? Yes, indeed I had heard, but much as I would like to

SAINT ON THE MARCH

stay, I was afraid they would have to count me out. In fact (looking at my watch) I had better be off right now, otherwise I would be late. At this there were more shakes of the head and Sitaram started mumbling in evident embarrassment.

The truth was that my driver had gone with his cart to fetch some of the wedding guests from the bridegroom's village. And he wasn't back yet. Sitaram apologised. It had never occurred to Dharam Pal that I was only staying a mere twenty-four hours. He, Sitaram, would certainly have stopped this happening. But he had known nothing about it until this minute. It seemed that every bullock in the village had trundled off and that still there hadn't been enough. My driver, who knew the other village, had volunteered his services. . . . As he spoke, Sitaram traced a pattern in the dust with a twig.

Oddly enough, though I had nearly chewed my nails off the evening before when I had missed my train the first time, now that I was missing it again I scarcely cared. Why not, after all? What's a schedule if it can't be broken? During the last fortnight, while keeping in mind by what date my quest must come to an end, I had never dared to guess what would happen between each separate sunset. Accustomed to the discomforts, I had begun to travel lighter and lighter. And now, in a condition of slightly puzzled detachment, I watched myself floating away like a speck of dust across the vast anonymity of India's northern plain.

The lack of fuss that followed my agreement to stay was as impressive as the fuss over my invitation was flattering. I was just one more addition to the serried ranks of feeders. Nobody piled me with garlands or plied me with special food. Nobody asked me to make a speech nor, when the music started, to sing a song. Having got separated from Sitaram in the crush, conversation with my fellow-diners was a trifle limited, though one lean and turbaned elder, after scrutinising me severely, bent forward and, summoning Sitaram's help from the next courtyard, enquired whether London had recently been bombed. I said, no, but that it had been bombed

A VILLAGE CO-OPERATES

ten years ago in the war. And you all went into shelters beneath the ground? I nodded. But then, he asked, what did you do with the cows? Surely you couldn't leave them unprotected on the streets? It was obviously a question which had troubled him ever since he had heard of the world war.

I did not see the bride walk seven paces tied to the arm of her husband, nor the crimson veil of her *sari* lifted to give her bridegroom his first view of her face. The crush was too great. But I judged from the happy nods of the people in front of me that the bridegroom approved of what he saw. A few minutes later I stole out unnoticed and walked up the empty village street to Diwan Singh's courtyard. Impossible to sleep much before midnight. The air was now the consistency of hot treacle. But I lay quite still on one of the wooden beds looking up at the stars.

What impressed most, of course, was the complete ordinariness of this village. Since it had dedicated itself to the cause of social justice, it had not been besieged by a battery of cameramen, lectured at by experts, examined by sociologists, nor even exhorted by Government officials. Apart from one visit of a tractor, two lots of improved seeds and the promise of an irrigation canal from the Bettwa River under the second Five-year Plan, Mangroth had received no outside help or encouragement. In one thing and one thing only lay its claim to fame: quietly, hidden from the limelight, it had decided to pull itself up by its own boot-strings. If Mangroth could make such a decision, then every other village in India could do the same.

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

VINOBA INTENSELY DISLIKES this confusion of *Bhoodan* with inspired slumming. To him the movement is either the first step towards a total revolution of society, a revolution through love, or else it is nothing. Hardly a prayer speech goes by without him making this plain. At Chandil he said: "We do not aim at doing mere acts of kindness, but at creating a kingdom of kindness." Then he voiced the warning against palliative measures typical of other and less gentle revolutionaries. "Kindness can and does exist even in the kingdom of wickedness, but only as a pinch of salt exists in bad food—to give a better taste to that with which it is mixed. . . ."

To many Indians and nearly all foreigners—even those who are impressed with the *Bhoodan* movement itself—the idea of Vinoba as a serious social revolutionary raises little more than a condescending smile. Time-honoured clichés—"You can't put the clock back," "You can't change human nature"—spring to mind with the speed of a conditioned reflex. Besides, the cartoonist's picture of Gandhi with goat and spinning wheel has made the whole subject irresistibly funny and, with a quick pat on the back for *Bhoodan* and a secret beatitude in honour of our own sophistication, we pass by unharmed on the opposite side of the road.

Mangroth cured me of any tendency to condescension. I could no longer file my reactions to *Bhoodan* in separate compartments. "*Bhoodan* is like *modak* cakes," Vinoba says. "Analytically, the cakes are made of nothing but flour and sugar and fat. No one would care to eat the ingredients separately or even as a simple mixture. We cannot relish them until they are prepared in a special way. Equally we have

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

accepted this *Bhoodan* work because we want social change and a social revolution; because it will alleviate the miseries of the poor; and because it may help to cleanse and purify our own minds and hearts. It is a piece of confectionery prepared of all these ingredients. We cannot accept one ingredient and reject another." The metaphor appealed to me—I have a child's tooth for sweets—but did this particular confection really suit the Western palate? I decided to taste it and see.

I was on my way from Mangroth to Sevagram *Ashram*, Gandhi's old centre near Wardha, at the time. In the unlighted "inter" carriage were two Government clerks holding an animated Hindi conversation through which floated fragmentary phrases of English. "I think him a decent fellow with very much brain. . . . I have need to go to Lucknow to achieve a few purchases. . . . His wife is always most jolly and has not even the smaller symptoms of sickness. . . . Yes, yes; flooding, of course, there *will* be." Yet when they bought water at a station round midnight and I asked: "Is the water cold?" They gave me a blank stare. I repeated the question three times till the fatter one said—not, you notice, a mere "I don't understand"—but an excessively polite: "I'm afraid that I cannot quite exactly follow your meaning." Next morning as we drew near Jhansi the temperature climbed up to 120° and I climbed in to a top bunk, where, head tickled by horse-hair (or was it fleas?), I tried to sort out my impressions.

How does Vinoba envisage the Kingdom of Kindness? From Mangroth it would seem to be a kingdom in which the peasant not the bureaucrat is the uncrowned king. "The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," and although the land may be held on trust by individual farmers, the village itself is the real owner of it, deciding how the acreage can best be divided. Vinoba wants each village to become as self-sufficient as possible in food and clothing, not exporting either of these primary necessities until local needs have been met. He opposes the growing of cash crops—coconut plantations for American hair-oil and British soap, jute for sacking, mats and

string all made in distant factories—not only because the primary producer gets the merest pittance out of the fat profits of the industrialist (this, after all, could be changed by a revolution of a different kind), but because reliance on cash crops as a main source of income introduces greed, destroys the farmer's sense of community, and substitutes no social values in return. What human meaning exists in the fact that an undernourished peasant on the Malabar coast should toil ceaselessly to produce the material needed for foundation creams sold in Bond Street? To Vinoba "money tells lies and is like a loafing tramp," and he wishes to loosen some at least of the shackles with which it has bound the spirit of man. "Money should be no more than an appendix to the book of life. But to-day it is the sole theme of every chapter."

At this point my Western half, trying for the sixteenth time to direct a current of air at itself from the carriage's single electric fan, cries out: "We can't do without machines. Things have gone too far for that." But who said Vinoba wanted to do without them? In his early days, Gandhi once called machinery a "great sin," and we city-dwellers have never forgotten it, overlooking the fact that he modified his views later. Vinoba, building as in so much else on the experiments that Gandhi made before him, has no such sweeping condemnation to live down. To him machinery is morally neutral: it is man's misuse of it which constitutes the sin. "A machine which is helpful at one time or place may be harmful at another. . . . No set formula can be laid down. We should therefore have neither blind infatuation for the machine nor blind opposition to it. Service of man should be the sole test."

"Service of man," not profits, not efficiency and not the limitless multiplication of wants and possession. It sounds simple, almost trite, but what in practice does it mean? In terms of organisation, it means that small factories should be operated by each group of villages to meet local needs—such as agricultural implements, household and house-building

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

materials. It means that industries which require mass production or a high degree of centralisation—electricity, mining, transport, communications, steel—should be restricted to the minimum necessary for the country's reasonable comfort and convenience and that co-operative farms should be attached to such industries so that the workers can have a healthy, open-air occupation for half of their working day. "Efficiency should be combined with serenity of mind," Vinoba once said to me. "After all, a motor car has both acceleration and brakes."

My Western half flickers up again, groping blindly for an orange at the bottom of a plastic bag. "Service of man? Of course we all agree with that. But cannot mass-production methods also serve man by supplying his needs cheaply and quickly and reducing his working hours so that he can spend the rest of his time in happy and creative leisure?"

Vinoba has a twinkling parable in reply: "Bags of sugar are carried by the bullocks to make their way into the belly of the epicure: and the astonishing thing is that the epicure gets a bad liver and the bullock a broken back. Such is the miracle wrought by sugar, an article sweet beyond dispute. So it is with our machine age. We produce such tons and tons of happiness that the sheer weight of it crushes us."

Lying back, orange juice exuding over my chin, I remember the words and wonder for a moment what on earth they mean. Perhaps this: Mass production leaps madly ahead, but the millennium of creative leisure eludes us. Two hot world wars and now a permanent cold one have prevented it, say the mass-producers. No, replies Vinoba, for are not these evils partly the result of mass-production methods with its rising demands for markets and supplies? Besides, the Arcadia of creative leisure has been indefinitely postponed for another reason. Mass production has given industry a passion for limitless profits and workers a passion for limitless spending. "Money is like God," Vinoba says: "It, too, is everywhere." Advertising has stepped in to increase home consumption.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

Desires are stimulated ("You might have been the girl he kissed"), fears played upon ("Why feel too old at thirty-five?"), new appetites cultivated ("No one can afford to be without Miko—used in 3,000,000 American homes"). The loafing tramp of leisure has become a relentless taskmaster. He drives us to work harder and harder so as to acquire more and more gadgets with which to decorate him. Restless dissatisfaction never leaves us, as continual and scorpion-tongued as that which once tortured the soul of saints stumbling towards God.

There is indeed a false philosophy at the very root of our theory of creative leisure. A man's work is himself. Through it he objectifies his personality. His leisure will never be creative unless his work is creative too. How can we train a nation of amateur poets, painters and musicians on the factory conveyer belt, where all contact with satisfactory living is lost? Is it any wonder that art should have become an ornamental nightmare understood only by a minority of intellectuals and that the majority should seek their recreation as passive and mindless spectators of the stadium or the glass and silver screens?

For Vinoba the service of man consists in something different: not multiplying his wants nor condemning him to hours of soulless drudgery, but helping him to the worship of God and a satisfying and meaningful contact with his fellows. To this end he believes that men should live in associations small enough for them to have a sense of common identity and personal significance. ("God gave two eyes, two hands and two ears to everybody to co-operate with one another. Had he given four eyes and no ears to one, and four ears and no eyes to another, the former would have had to take the help of the latter to hear; and the latter of the former to see.") People should be surrounded by objects of love shaped by their own hands or the hands of their neighbours and the fruit of their labour should be seen to have relevance to the community in which they live.

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

In such a society, government would be "as invisible as the thread that holds a flower garland together." After the legal measures necessary to safeguard the existence of the smaller industries, power would be dispersed. Huge mass-producing combines or centralised networks of force would be reduced to a minimum. Yet, although he himself makes no greater claim on the machine age than the possession of a pocket watch and fountain-pen, Vinoba welcomes time-saving machinery which promotes the new society, and condemns only that which hinders it. Electricity, good communications, irrigation, sewing machines, power-driven spindles and looms in the cottage yard—all these he wants. But he rejects huge cloth-mills, tractors (except when used to break barren ground), synthetic food factories—the first and last for obvious reasons, the second because tractors in India would also bring about widespread unemployment, forcing displaced labour into the top-heavy industrialisation that Vinoba wants to avoid. The standard of living in such a society may be simple compared to our complex labyrinth of gadgetry, but may it not be higher in happiness, in culture, in spiritual values, in things that really count?

We were nearing Jhansi. I bought a water-melon which was tasteless and probably infected. It was too hot for argument, so my Western half assumed a tone of languid sophistication: "I've heard of these simple-lifers before. And believe me their passion for the past doesn't impress me one bit." But Vinoba has forestalled me again. Three years ago he said: "Some call this an era of sin and degradation. But how can that be? If it was so, how could I, a mere humble devotee of God, have received thousands of acres in trust for the landless poor?" He is no gloomy Jeremiah looking back to a golden age that his own imagination has gilded. He exults in the present and longs for the future. Himself a mathematician, he has the deepest admiration for Western science. But he wants to tame the monstrous engine to which it has given birth. "Science can transform this earth into heaven. But it can only do so in

SAINT ON THE MARCH

combination with non-violence. If science is yoked to violence, the world will be shattered to bits." Is this putting the clock back—or forward?

But I distrust Utopias, like any good child of Western democracy should. Did not both Ruskin and Tolstoy behave miserably to their wives? And aren't some Communists still idealistic too?

Here, too, Vinoba startles me out of complacency: "Rama has come, Krishna and Christ have come—but still the world needs help." A new society means new problems. It is not to establish some static perfection that Vinoba walks; merely to change the direction in which we walk ourselves. . . . Besides Vinoba has no intention of *imposing* his ideas on others. "I rejoice when somebody does not act on my ideas because he understands but does not approve of them," he says. "But I am sad when someone acts without understanding." His aim is to change hearts, not governments. "The Government is only a bucket. The people are the well. If there is no water in the well, how can there be any in the bucket? I go to the source of water, the people themselves." If the people are converted, then the Government will automatically change.

His method of conversion? Not legal sanctions nor threats of retaliation and revenge, but the power of self-denial and gentleness (*tapas*, as the Indian scriptures call it). It is a power once understood by Christians contemplating the Cross. . . . In power of any other kind Vinoba is not interested. Three years ago in Delhi the Government offered him 10,000,000 acres of uncultivated land which had reverted to the State. They suggested that he distribute and develop it as he wished. And they "showed unto him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. . . ." But Vinoba did not take long to make up his mind. Land that belonged to the Government was the Government's responsibility, he said. Besides, he had come to disperse power, not to acquire it. . . .

How, apart from *Bhoodan*, does Vinoba hope to bring about this kingdom? First there is the system of basic education—

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

Gandhi's last discovery—which I was to see again at Sevagram in a few days' time. As *Bhoodan* spreads, basic education goes with it, training children in the ideals of the new village society. The seven-year-olds come to school often naked except for the lucky charm suspended round their tummies. In three years they will have spun their own yarn and the older children will have woven it up into vests and loin-cloths for them. Related to this, they study arithmetic (counting the hanks), reading and writing (keeping a work diary). Then, where does cotton come from? It grows. So why not let us grow it? The school makes a garden. In the course of their school life they assist at the whole cycle of production. What they learn is not merely abstract knowledge drilled in by rote: it bears directly on their own lives and experience. It is live knowledge—not dead fact—equipping them as useful village citizens rather than as unproductive stenographers in the nearest town. At Sevagram I was to see once again on the cheerful, friendly faces of the children at the basic schools living proof that work well done in co-operation with one's fellows can be a source of joy.

Then there is *Sampattidan*, the gift of wealth. Through this those who have no land to give pledge themselves "with a view to the furtherance and fulfilment of the non-violent economic revolution" to make over a sixth of their yearly income to the cause—and to make it over for life. The money remains with the donor, who must spend it on public works and community needs. He maintains an account of what he has spent and submits it yearly to Vinoba for inspection. Alternatively, the wealthy can give labour—or wells, seeds, bullocks, implements—but never just money. *Sampattidan*, the principle of non-possession, says Vinoba, is not only spiritually efficacious for the individual who practises it, but "can help us construct a better and richer worldly life. . . . The need of the hour is to mobilise wealth in every form and to press it into the service of society. *Sampattidan* will turn every home into a bank on which society can draw freely for all its wants. As the money offered will be used locally, it will be an easily

SAINT ON THE MARCH

workable plan." "*Bhoodan* is like giving one's daughter in marriage, but *Sampattidan* means binding the marriage vows on oneself." Already, even though Vinoba has expressed no more than pious hopes on the subject, some thousands have taken the pledge. . . .

Soon we are at Jhansi with a whole day's wait between trains. I lie on a wooden bench in the waiting-room in company with several hundred others. After eating one fried egg and drinking three bottles of vermilion-coloured pop, I take some books out of my bag and prepare for further battle. "Fine. Fine for a backward country like India, but does it really have any value for us? After all, a great many of the social virtues that Vinoba is trying to spread in his country already exist in our own." Yes, I thought, we have our virtues. ("When will the Western world," Vinoba once asked me with a twinkle, "tire of the perfection of its governments?") Justice, equality before the law, an ever-increasing network of security and rights, telephones that work and trains that run on time, intolerance to cruelty—as long as it happens within sight of our own doorstep. The list is long, the virtues are impressive.

Yet . . . in one brief lifetime we have nose-dived through submarine warfare, gas, obliteration air attacks, napalm, atom and hydrogen bombs down and down and down into vertiginous depths of horror. Nine million people have been liquidated in Nazi death-camps, uncounted millions in Siberia. Among my books is a copy of my great-grandfather's poems. I always carry it on my travels in the dutiful hope of one day reading from cover to cover. I pick it up and, as usual, take no more than a brief dip. "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay." Had he lived through the last half-century, would he still have written that?

"But this is the fault of Communists, of Nazis, of Fascists. Such things are not inherent in Western civilisation." Yet to defend this much vaunted civilisation we have to excel our enemies in those very practices that we condemn. "Power, naked, brutal, mechanical, nuclear and bacterial—this in the

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

end was the armour wherein he trusted." So may the Recording Angel write when he composes an epitaph for Western man.

The truth is that Western civilisation has for the last 100 years been increasingly built on greed and that the Nazis and Russian Communists in their different ways are merely the most recent and most horrible expression of it. Until fifty years ago industrialism was the monopoly of a very few powers. These countries with their enormous military might were able to buy raw materials cheap in the underdeveloped areas and then sell them their finished articles at a price which grossly favoured their own pockets. Their control over "colonial" markets was acquired by force in the days before war attained the final degradation of the twentieth century. But in our time the supremacy of these few powers has been challenged by the enraged and vicious nationalism of other countries, who wanted their share of power and plunder and hid their envy under various high-sounding ideological labels. Even Russian Communism is not the antithesis of capitalism, as some believe, but capitalism, the dialectics of profit and loss, run mad—State capitalism freed from the restraints which religion and morality still impose elsewhere.

What of to-day? More and more of the primary producing countries have set foot on the industrial road. The political optimists still proclaim that such industrialisation will increase the purchasing power of these countries. But will it? Increasing purchasing power means greater profits and investing power within the countries themselves. This means more native industries set up to meet the growing demands for goods. However we look at it, the export market is contracting. . . . Yet Britain has built up her Welfare State—indeed, her whole economy—on the assumption that the export market will indefinitely expand. And as she frenziedly mans her merchant adventurer's ship, rearms herself at immense cost with the latest machinery and prepares for an all-out price war with Germany and Japan, she ignores the irreparable leak that has already punctured the hold.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

What of America? America uses more iron and steel, more petrol, more newsprint and more rubber than the rest of the world put together. She now imports all these raw materials and over eighty others, having largely exhausted her own supplies (since 1900 it is estimated that more minerals have been taken out of American soil alone than from the whole world during previous history). She also spends yearly on defence sufficient to save millions in Asia, Africa and the southern half of her own continent from starvation. And what is the goal of Western civilisation? To reach the American standard of living—which means in Britain five times its present number of motor cars. And if we fail? A fresh plague of 'isms settling across the world like locusts behind which envy and frustrated greed can prepare to do battle for the fast-emptying larder of mother earth.

India is the land where beggars still mangle their own limbs in order to earn money, where long-distance trains run ten hours late and the hotel porter who points the way to the railway station expects to be paid a tip, where the high-caste lady wrapped in her cocoon of silk shakes a fist of fury at the guileless foreigner who accidentally touches the railway bunk purified by her presence. Held up at Jhansi by the usual delays, these were some of the minor horrors that obtruded themselves. By what virtue, then, has India the right to speak to our condition? By none. Yet we should beware lest our own virtuous complacency blinds us to a pearl of great price still hidden in India's squalid dust: the pearl of vision.

Did the Romans, civilised lords of creation that they were, ever dream that salvation would come from those backward, backbiting, utterly unimportant Jews? And would they, even if they had dreamed it, ever have looked for Christ in a cowshed? And we, arrayed in all our technological splendour, have we forgotten that where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also? Or do we imagine that somehow during these past 2,000 years the camel has acquired a miraculous knack of passing through a needle's eye? Perhaps, after all, there is the

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

same connection between virtue and lack of vision—as there seems to be between vision and lack of virtue. . . .

In India Hindus eat very little meat, since they believe in the sanctity of all life. Yet in certain parts of the north, goats are sacrificed once a year to Kali, goddess of destruction. A horrible, hot mist steams up from the rivers of blood that bubble across the temple courtyards. Christian missionaries raise pious hands of horror. Yet they forget that back home fifty times that amount of meat is butchered every day behind the steel doors of the slaughter-house. This is not to suggest that the pagan method of sanctifying the “natural” man and thus turning even the meat he eats into a sacrifice on a steaming altar is better than the large-scale hypocrisy that results from one Christian ethic. It is merely to show that in India Mammon is not locked out of sight. On the contrary he is alive and visible. He walks the streets stamped firmly on every third face. Daily he breaks all codes of decent Anglo-Saxon conduct. But the existence of Mammon means the existence of saints too. For saints can only grow where there is real and personified evil for them to wrestle with. Where evil is a dim abstraction labelled “materialism” or a split atom exploding over some distant Pacific island, saints do not flourish. For what possible connection can there be between such inhuman things and the smooth and friendly faces round the bar of the local pub?

India, then, for matriarchal, historical, geographical and spiritual reasons, still honours the saint above the film star, the political boss, the football hero. She has not been misled by her own virtue into reducing her saints to the level of mere professional peddlers of salvation—good, average bats who only wear a dog-collar on Sundays. But the type of saint that India honours has changed. After centuries of meditative sloth the *sannyasis* have come down from Himalayan peaks, emerged from forest hideouts, stripped themselves of ashes and excrement in order to endure the rigours of love in the all too human dust from which their forerunners shook themselves free. For this,

SAINT ON THE MARCH

Western virtue can claim its own share of credit. Two hundred years of missionary effort in spreading Christ's ideal of human service and His call for right worldly activity have had their effect. Western virtue has been crossed with Indian vision. It is this that has given birth to the most exciting and important spiritual movement of our time. . . .

An elderly Anglo-Indian is muttering at me—pathetic flotsam cast up by two races, two cultures, disowned by both: "These Hindus—it is this mumbo-jumbo over Hindu weddings that is upsetting the trains. They book whole bogeys for their wedding parties. That's why no one else can get on, isn't it? Look at that great trestle table wreathed with flowers. Do you know what it says? Water for the So-and-so wedding party. Do you think you or I can get a drop of iced water there? Not on our lives. We have to be content with water from the station tap. Have you tried it? Well don't. It's over 100° and full of soot." I give a rather rigid grin. Does he think me deliberately rude because of the tell-tale sallowness of his wrinkled skin? What an appalling thought. He has a paper. How long is it since I have seen one? Well, I mustn't exaggerate, but certainly a fortnight. Here is a chance to show myself reasonably friendly and to switch the conversation. But soon he is belly-aching once more. Life has bred the habit in him. "Those Russians are at it again, you see. First it was Poland, then the rest of Eastern Europe and Czechoslovakia, then China, then Korea, and now Indo-China. And soon it'll be India's turn. I reckon you Americans"—every Westerner is assumed to come from the U.S. these days—"had better act quickly before the rest of the world is wheedled or threatened into the Communist camp." Then he looks at me, salaciously licking his lips. "You've got that great atomic stock-pile you boast of, haven't you? Well, why the bloody hell don't you use it, old fellow?"

I return his paper, escaping from the querulous monotony of his voice to the booking office. Yet I can't escape from his question. That is the last ditch still resisting Vinoba's siege.

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

"Violence may kill the murderer," Vinoba says, "but it has never killed murder. The law of retaliation is the law of the multiplication of evil." In my heart I believe him: and I can see that it applies to the unarmed landlords of *Bhoodan* and to the muddled, but well-meaning paternalism of the British *Raj*. But what about aggressive evil—evil armed to the teeth and ready to stop at nothing to obtain its ends? After Belsen and Buchenwald, after the appalling purges and massacres of Russia and eastern Europe, can one any longer play the ostrich and doubt that such evil exists—even though our own way of life may share the responsibility for having given it birth? I remember with horror the recent disclosure in the Ribbentrop diaries that it was "British pacifism" which finally convinced Hitler that the Western nations would not fight if he launched his attack on Poland.

But what Vinoba means by pacifism is something utterly different from what we have come to associate with the word in the West. After all, Gandhi held that it was better to resist evil with violence if one lacked the courage or strength to resist it by other methods. He applauded tiny Poland for taking up arms against the invading Nazis. And at the end of his life he admitted that much of India's pacifism had been based on cowardice instead of courage. . . . That is why Vinoba had to start all over again from scratch. Vinoba does not reproach India for her Army, Navy and Air Force. He realises that there must be a change of hearts and a new order of society before faith in armaments can be superseded. To disarm until the spiritual strength for non-violent resistance has been built up is merely to invite sloth on one's own part and greed on the part of others.

Vinoba walks to restore India's faith in herself and in the new way that Mahatma Gandhi discovered: the way of non-violent resistance. Even if none respond to his call, he must continue to walk. For all heroes are heroic first in faith. How else would they have the courage to strike vertically up the mountainside from the flat plain of history? It is the faith of

SAINT ON THE MARCH

heroes that has brought the law of love within the distant vision of mankind.

At the mention of non-violent resistance, the Westerner inevitably shakes his head. Jhansi Station seems to have affected my brain. Why should atom bombs melt at the sight of an army of welfare workers ladling out penicillin and cups of strong tea?

But behind the buttons and steering wheels of the directed missiles sit human beings, not monsters. People of like passions with ourselves—although temporarily enslaved by fear and greed. The Peace Army skilled in its methods, effective in its action, heroic in its determination, could rescue these humans from the armour plating of fear. Love casteth out fear—or have we forgotten?

Besides, would atom bombs really be used when it was clear that the opposing army had abandoned them? Would not their use be prompted by a terror of retaliation, an eagerness to "get in first"? While even if we agree that evil would initially triumph, it would then face the need for continued vigilance over the unarmed but still resisting territories that it had conquered. Here again heroic non-co-operation, with the power of the original sacrifice to support it, could undo evil at the point where it is always open to attack—within.

Ultimately, of course, our belief in the practicality of such a course of action must rest on faith, on the passion with which we hold to that of God in every man. It involves appalling, heart-breaking difficulties. . . . There is no shred of a guarantee of success. . . . Yet what other ways are left for the free world, the world in which faith in God still lives, to defend this faith and this freedom?

A continuation of the cold war? Defeating evil by "negotiating from strength"? But even if the Communists do (sometimes) give way now, will it be long before their ruthless economy has built up an armament superior to ours? The seesaw will continue tilting backwards and forwards, with human happiness wobbling uneasily at the fulcrum; both sides ever

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

more rabid in their search for secret weapons. Well, *that's* been tried before, by the dinosaurs and mastodons. They loaded themselves with so much strength from which to "negotiate" that in the end they were unfitted for anything but war. And it's the price we'll have to pay, too. Keeping up our strength will cost us everything we value. Standards of life will continue to fall as more and more is spent on armaments. Totalitarian revolutions will follow economic breakdown. And even if we do keep the war cold we'll wither the fruits of peace.

If the war becomes "hot," what then? Here, again, whoever wins, it won't be the freedom we value so much. The destruction and chaos that will follow victory in a third global war, the armed occupation of vast and hostile territories which will be needed as its conclusion—can we really believe that "liberal democracy" will survive such things? After slaughtering millions with atom or H bombs, will we still be able to talk of the liberty of the individual? Economically, politically, psychologically we will have committed ourselves to the very practices which we claim to detest.

In Konrad Lorenz's brilliant and delightful book, *King Solomon's Ring*, the famous Austrian ornithologist throws a searching light on our human dilemma. He shows that the lower animals have developed an inhibition against killing their own species which varies in direct ratio to the power of their weapons and their capacity for escape. It is by this means that they have managed not to exterminate themselves. Take the case of the turtle-doves, the traditional harbingers of peace. Normally their flight is too swift and their beaks not sufficiently murderous for any conflict between them to prove fatal. But just confine them in a cage and see what happens. One day the doctor returned to find one of his pet doves standing on the prostrate body of her mate, whom she had flayed to the point of death. Her eyes wore that refined and sentimental look that has so appealed to humanity since poetry was first invented.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

The wolf on the other hand, traditional emblem of brutality, is almost incapable of killing one of his fellows. And for the simple reason that he is, literally, armed to the teeth. When one wolf is vanquished by another, the victim stands rigidly exposing the nape of his neck to his conqueror's fangs, inviting him, it seems, to rip open his jugular vein. But this is precisely what the victor cannot do. As long as the victim retains this attitude of humility, the victor's fighting instincts are totally inhibited.

Why is man the one animal with deadly weapons who has not yet developed this inhibition? Because his weapons are not part of his body. Brain power, not muscle, has been the key to our evolution. But the point has now been reached when man holds the power to exterminate his own species and unless he can develop a moral taboo against war, equivalent to the "motor" taboo seen in wolves and almost every other lethally armed species of lower animal, his race may well be run.

Is it not here that Christ's great injunction takes on new meaning? "And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer him the other also." Nietzsche thought, and there have been several Christian mystics who seem to have agreed, that this meant a perverted, masochistic delight in being hurt. Offer your cheek so that your enemy might hit you again—and preferably harder than before. But Christ's meaning was surely exactly the opposite. Offer it so that your enemy is unable to hit you. Throw yourself on his mercy, show that, although you may believe him to be doing wrong, you are courageous enough to have faith in his innate potentiality for good. If you fail to convert him, then grit your teeth, hate it, but expose yourself again. One day slowly, through blood and tears and toil and sweat, the moral taboo will come. Remember that it is part of the unwritten law that in the moral field there shall be no victory without suffering. Not only out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, but also, it seems, out of the fangs of wolves. . . .

To-day mankind can only use the most lethal of his weapons

THE KINGDOM OF KINDNESS

corporately. It is therefore no longer mere individuals but nations and groups who will have to show us the alternative to war. It may mean the martyrdom of a whole people. But is that too big a price to pay when the alternative is a spiral nose-dive into evil which will end in the death of civilisation, even of humanity itself?

Vinoba understands the nature of the evolutionary step that faces us. Unlike Gandhi he does not contend that non-violence is an absolute value, applicable to all stages of human development. "War began with duels," he says; "But the age of duelling is gone. The system did not work, so thousands began to fight against thousands; and when that did not prove enough millions gathered on either side and each party vied with the other in increasing its number of combatants. And now we have reached the time when not millions, but hundreds of millions participate in war. And the choice that we face is either to prepare for total war or to abandon the path of violence altogether."

Vinoba realises, then, that the individual and society, the style of life and the economic order, the greed in nations and the tension and hostility between them are all bound inextricably together in the fear-ridden world in which we live. And that is why he wants to revolutionise not only the individual, but the society which both influences and is influenced by the individuals that compose it.

Vinoba's kingdom is no Utopian vision. It is very much of this world. How else should this world have stopped to listen to him above the din of a thousand propaganda machines and the distant rumble of explosions? Once again we are learning that the truth has undreamed-of carrying power: that the example of a great and pure character is worth a thousand speeches.

Christ died that the individual might learn the law of suffering love; Gandhi that we might see its relevance to society. Vinoba, with his two skinny legs and a voice that scarcely rises above a whisper, returns to besiege the obstinate

SAINT ON THE MARCH

heart of man. Meanwhile, time grows shorter and every moment of delay brings us nearer ruin. . . .

2 a.m. The Madras Mail audibly approaching Jhansi. The Anglo-Indian rousing me with frenzied good nature. Then out of the silence a stampede of orange-sellers, passengers, would-be passengers, station officials, porters, sweepers and hotel contact men—all of them fighting to get near the carriage doors. Arrival goes to the fittest. I lose a book, a tooth-brush and the Anglo-Indian. But at last it's over. I am in the carriage along with 100 others and watch the first faint ribbon of dawn on the hem of the night sky. The guard whistles. The train hoots. There is a moment of awed silence. The passengers stop shouting and look at each other in terror. Will we ever move?

We do. The last lap of my journey has started. All set for Sevagram, the village of peace and service.

FOURTEEN

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

SEVAGRAM AGAIN! Eight years before I had imagined that everything would change with Gandhi's death. Now I can see how wrong I was. In India men idolise stones on the flimsiest of pretexts. But at Sevagram, Gandhi's own home, there is no single portrait or photograph of the old man, although outside it he is pinned or hung remorselessly on every wall. What better proof than this that at Sevagram his spirit is still alive?

When the community assembles for prayers every evening the old man's canvas back-rest and bolster are taken out to the gravel prayer ground and placed where he used to sit without garlands, incense or rosaries. Plain, unromantic objects, they carry with them all the same a sense of presence more real than any picture. The first evening at prayers, when they are reciting in Hindi the beautiful Anglican collect, “Almighty God, unto Whom all hearts be open,” I look at the back-rest and remember a story. . . . Gandhi on his evening walk one day stopped every few seconds to pick up stones from the field and put them in a basket. “Mahatmaji, what are you doing?”

“We had been hoping to have a metalled road built for us out from Wardha,” came the prompt reply, “But the estimate is more than we can afford. We must build the road ourselves, so I am collecting the first stones.”

“We must build the road ourselves”—don't rely on gods, governments or Gandhis to do it for us. This somehow is the message of a bolster and canvas back-rest in the prayer ground at Sevagram. An unusual “presence in the midst.”

Gandhi's hut is left as it was when he died. A nest of tiny rooms with a wooden bed, a spinning wheel, a lavatory basin

SAINT ON THE MARCH

set in a mud surround, glassless windows with straw shutters, a spike of yellowing paper bills hanging in a corner. . . . In its own way it is a building as perfect as the Pearl Mosque at Agra. It tells of a life at ease with itself and with its maker.

Sitting alone in it for a moment, I enjoy the luxury of a dream fulfilled, the dream that one day I should come back. But this isn't the return that I dreamed of. It is more exciting. Sevagram is no pious and placid monument to the past: it is a living idea that grows and changes as each month goes by. A new experiment in farming has begun; aimed to show whether 5 acres intensively cultivated can yield an adequate living for a family of five. . . . The Basic Education Institution is three times the size it was eight years ago and Aryanayakam, the Christian from Ceylon who is still the head of it, has to pace an area of 120 acres like a Sinhalese lion, keeping students, teachers, trainees, carpenters, composters, cowherds and twelve-year-old kitchen ministers (the schoolchildren now have to cook for several hundred) ceaselessly up to the mark.

Sevagram is still the only place in India where it is a sin to be late, and the fury of its bells—mealtime bells, waking bells, school bells, prayer bells, spinning bells, even rice-cleaning bells—has, if anything, increased. No need here to seek inspiration from the past: and as I sit alone in that little hut it seems suddenly right that I should have returned, not as a pilgrim returns to the shrine of a dead saint, but as a voyager on the track of a second saint who is still alive.

Vinoba does not like speaking about himself. I tried several times to break through his reserve and to ply him with personal questions. "Do you feel you underwent some internal change when you gave up being a recluse? Why are you, who seem serenity personified, afflicted with a stomach ulcer, the disease of the worried business-man? Have you found it difficult to keep the vow of chastity which you took at the age of twelve?"

Vinoba looked puzzled and a little pitying that I should be

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

interested in such things. Then he gave a teasing laugh and said: “I go on forgetting my own life as I grow older. Every day I proceed further and further away from the past. Perhaps in this I am like India herself. For India, as I am sure you know, has little sense of history.” And I knew that he meant, too: Why waste time in idle curiosity about the lives of others when it would be better spent in trying to live rightly yourself?

But the multitude continue to ask questions: “Whence hath this man all these things?” “Whence hath this man this wisdom?” We enjoy discovering a damaging ordinariness (“Is not this the carpenter . . . and are not his sisters with us?”) or a supernatural riddle (“Ye cannot tell whence I come and whither I go”), perhaps because it excuses us from practising what the life itself would teach. I, at least, can claim to have waited to the very end before indulging in vain speculation about Vinoba’s past. For it was not in fact till the final stage of my quest had brought me to Sevagram that I even learnt the first basic essentials of his parentage and birth. Perhaps it was right in Vinoba’s case thus to reverse the normal trend of biography.

Vinoba was born on September 11th, 1895, to a Brahmin family of Maharashtra. Maharashtra Brahmins are usually among the most orthodox of Hindu castes. Vinayak Godse, Gandhi’s assassin, came from this community; so it is fitting that it should have provided the old man’s heir and successor as well (Vinoba is a familiar version of Vinayak, just to make quite sure that we don’t miss the point). But anyone who judged from this that the cause of Vinoba’s greatness lay, as it would in the West, in some heroic break with orthodoxy, some struggle with parental authority or some deep unhappiness at home, would be grievously wrong. Vinoba’s life is a seamless garment.

To start with, his father was not orthodox. He was a textile expert, scrupulous, methodical, straightforward and a stern devotee of Western science and education. He had a hand in

the production of the first khaki cloth, later to become the universal livery of British soldiers. He wanted his sons to go to England to study.

Vinoba's mother was a serene and pious soul. When she had cooked delicacies for the various religious festivals with which the Hindu year is punctuated, she would ask her sons to take portions of the meal to their neighbours before settling down to eat themselves. Once a beggar came to their door, and Vinoba said: "He is plump and strong, Mother. To give him food would be to encourage laziness."

But his mother, who was already putting rice in the begging bowl, replied: "The beggar who is come may be God Himself. Who are we to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving?"

Indian women have only recently acquired legal rights. A few years ago they were not allowed to divorce, inherit property or remarry. Yet to-day they play a role in public life that is often in advance of their sisters in countries where women have been emancipated for half a century. Independent India's first Governor of the United Provinces, Health Minister, Ambassador in Soviet Russia and President of the United Nations Assembly have all been women. The fact is that, in spite of the legal disabilities of her women, India is a profoundly matriarchal society—perhaps the last civilised country to retain the values of matriarchy. The mother is the uncrowned queen of India, and she rules, not by a sharp tongue and a sharper rod, but by mute self-denial and tender attention to the wants of others. If her husband maltreats her, she does not reproach him; she merely fasts in silence, fixing the wrongdoer with large and liquid eyes. An Indian mother must never eat until she has first fed her family.

It is this power of self-sacrifice which has given Indian women their wonderfully smooth foreheads, gliding walk, serene manner and staunch refusal to abandon the traditional dress in favour of Western frocks. In return, the mother is regarded as the vicereine of God, a kind of divine deputy,

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

the only human being consistently able to suggest the Godlike virtues of charity and compassion. It is in her children that the mother seeks her chief emotional satisfaction, for her husband subordinates her to his own mother, and does not fully reverence his wife until she too has given birth to children and become a mother in her turn. This family structure has a profound effect on Indian psychology and ideals. It reduces tension and strangles the Œdipus complex at birth—since the father is not felt to be a rival for the mother’s affections. It also puts a premium on the feminine virtues of placidity, patience, chastity and self-denial rather than on the “rugged” individualism and zipo-bang-zingo-go-gettiveness characteristic of societies where, however much they might be petted and pedestalled, women ape the characteristics of men.

Most saints are feminine in their relationship with God, and in all languages the word for “soul” is of feminine gender. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why sainthood is the only profession in which women have produced as many geniuses as men. In India it is not surprising, therefore, that saints carry the national reverence for motherhood to extraordinary lengths, consciously attempting to convert the masculine external world to the virtues embodied in their own mothers. So it was with Gandhi. So it is with Vinoba.

Vinoba did not accept his father’s ideas about his future. Even if he inherited the talents and the temperament of his father, he adopted his mother’s outlook. From an early age he wished to be a *sannyasi*, a wandering hermit, but a *sannyasi* of a new kind who would give up everything for the sake of his country. It was for this reason that he solemnly took a vow of chastity at the age of twelve, influencing his two young brothers to follow suit. As a boy Vinoba shared the arrogant untidiness and something of the ill-manners of most gifted and original adolescents. He was impatient of stupidity and unwilling to compromise when he disagreed. He devoured nationalist and political literature, adored a biography of Mazzini, Italy’s great national leader (the book was proscribed for a short time by

SAINT ON THE MARCH

the British, which did much to increase its popularity), and filled his head with the writings of the Marathi saints. He was consistently at the top of his class, and even to this day mathematics, as he told me, comes second only to God in his affections. But by the age of sixteen he had lost interest in formal studies. He preferred long walks through the countryside, or hours spent hunched over books of his own choice in the public library of Baroda, where his family lived. At school and college his attendance became more and more irregular.

One day he sat by his mother while she was cooking. He held a roll of papers in his hand. Deliberately he lit the roll at one end and held it up to burn. His mother asked him what he was doing. "Reducing all my school and college certificates to ashes," came the reply.

"But won't you need them in the future?"

Vinoba shook his head.

A month later he left Baroda. He never saw his mother again: she died during the influenza epidemic of 1918. He refused to attend her funeral, since he objected to the rigid caste system which prescribed that the last rites should be conducted by professional priests.

He had left Baroda ostensibly to take his intermediate examination at Bombay University. But secretly, he had made another decision. He got down from the train at Surat and headed east for Benares. He had no money, but that was a minor consideration. He had decided to "dedicate" himself. To what exactly he was going to be dedicated was less certain. A longing to study Sanscrit and to take part in the anti-British terrorist movement were strangely mixed in his head. Where better to combine them than at Benares University, the seat of Hindu learning and a hotbed of nationalist intrigue?

But Vinoba was quickly disillusioned with terrorism. He saw that a policy of deceit and violence only coarsened the moral fibre of those who followed it and stiffened the resolution of those against whom it was directed. He had been in

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

Benares three months when Gandhi, who had just returned from his successful non-violent campaign in South Africa on behalf of the Indian settlers there, made a speech at the University before an audience of bejewelled princes in which he told them to discard their finery, since it was bought with the blood of India's starving millions. This was the cause that Vinoba had been waiting for. India would not be free until she had purified herself so as to deserve freedom. For the first time Vinoba's moral and political ideals coincided. He joined Gandhi's *Ashram* at Sabarmati in Gujerat.

Gandhi was not used to young men with Vinoba's steady passion for self-denial. Usually the hot blood of youth was quickly chilled by the austerity of *ashram* life. But Vinoba was different. He vowed to wear no more than one garment at a time and to forgo salt, the last remaining condiment that he still allowed himself. And all this was done not “in the synagogue or standing on the corners of the street,” but in secret, where none but God could see. On learning that Vinoba had left home in true *sannyasi* style without telling his parents where he was going, Gandhi himself wrote to Baroda: “Your son Vinoba is with me. Young as he is, he has reached spiritual heights which have taken me years of patient labour to attain.”

Some time later Vinoba asked for a year's leave of absence from the *Ashram* in order to continue his interrupted Sanscrit studies and to wander at will over the countryside, seeing for himself how the poor lived. He set off on foot and without money. Exactly a year later, to the very minute, he returned. Gandhi, who had forgotten all about the date, was taken by surprise. “I admire your loyalty to truth,” he said.

“You mean my loyalty to mathematics,” Vinoba replied.

Gandhi smiled. “Can mathematics ever betray truth?”

Vinoba asked Gandhi to adopt him as his spiritual son—traditional in India when a young man puts himself in the hands of a *guru* or religious guide. Gandhi replied: “Your love and character overwhelm me, and I accept the role. A truthful

SAINT ON THE MARCH

father should produce a more truthful son than himself. In your case, through no effort of mine, I see that this has already happened."

From that time Gandhi regarded his serious young disciple as spiritually superior to himself. And, although he was twice Vinoba's age, being already over fifty, he gave the younger man the title of *Acharya*, preceptor, which Vinoba retains to this day.

In 1921 Seth Jamnalal Bajaj asked that the choicest bloom from Sabarmati *Ashram* be sent to Wardha to open a similar institution there. Gandhi chose Vinoba for the task. Seth Jamnalal himself was a not undistinguished bloom. A sugar king, he was one of the richer of the new batch of Indian industrialists. When Vinoba came to him, he put his entire family under the young apostle's charge. Then over the years he stripped himself of all his wealth in the service of the non-violent revolution, dying as a simple cowherd in one of the *ashrams*, started by Vinoba with money which he himself had diverted from his sugar mills.

Vinoba translated a small devotional book of Gandhi's in Marathi. He prefaced it with some introductory verses: "I am a messenger. I but repeat the language that comes from saints. In this what is there that can be called Vinoba's? . . . Vinoba is like the mathematical zero. But the honour of his master is increased by the addition of zeros." In the West such Oriental humility would seem suspiciously picturesque. Yet to those who know Vinoba, normally so puritanical in the simplicity of his speech, such occasional flourishes have the effect of reinforcing sincerity.

A messenger, then, which is still the only title he would claim, but at that stage he thought himself a very inferior one. There was still so much egoism breaking and blocking the message. What about his intellectual arrogance? He threw himself passionately into the work of a peasant. That was the way to conquer arrogance. He dug wells at the new *Ashram*, he spun for hours, he walked four miles down the railway track

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

cleaning the embankment which the peasants had fouled. He reduced his beloved reading to a mere hour a day.

With Jamnalal Bajaj by his side to wave his sugar-stick, *ashrams* grew up round Vinoba as he passed. First there was one at Maganwadi in Wardha town itself, a laboratory that carried out experiments in the improvement of village industries: here better paper, soap, shoes, oil lights, pots and fodder cakes were made. Then the Mahila *Ashram* on the road that now leads to Sevagram which has become a university for village women. Then the dairy farm, tannery and shoe factory at Go-Puri where retired cows, dying of comfortable old age, supply the leather. Finally, when Gandhi himself had come to Wardha to open the new *Ashram* at Sevagram (he took a vow in 1936 not to return to Sabarmati until full freedom was won), Vinoba shifted six miles away to Paunar. He had been ill, and the doctors advised a “hill station” for his convalescence. He replied that he knew of the very hill—a small mound where, above the river, Seth Jamnalal had built himself a country villa. The villa was handed over to him. He stripped it of all ornament, and yet another *ashram* came into being. . . .

In 1923 he was roped in as a last-minute substitute for a flag demonstration which had been banned by the British. This little jaunt cost him three months in jail. He visited jail again briefly during the 1932 civil disobedience movement. Then in 1940 he was chosen by Gandhi—much to everyone’s surprise, who expected the choice would fall on a national figure, such as Nehru or Rajendra Prasad—to be the first resister to court arrest in the “individual non-violent movement.” Through this movement Gandhi sought to protest against the decrees forbidding political assemblies of more than three persons and restricting freedom of speech—decrees which had been introduced when Britain declared war on an unwilling and dependent India’s behalf. Vinoba spent the best part of the next five years in jail. It was useful. It allowed him to study Arabic and to read the Koran seven times in the original (this he did so as to be able to communicate better with his Moslem fellows).

SAINT ON THE MARCH

It also gave him time to add the four south Indian languages of Tamil, Telugu, Kanarese and Malayalam to his growing repertoire, since there were a number of southerners in jail with him. Who said that at forty-eight memory was too tired to add to its stock? But more than that: the enforced leisure and unhealthy food gave him a stomach ulcer. This he called his "blessing", since it prompted him to introduce a final and yet more drastic simplification of his diet.

Political activity touched Vinoba very lightly. When he had been at Wardha twelve years he wrote to Gandhi that in spite of "many failings in myself . . . the conviction that God alone is, has grown." And this remained his sole test: did the contemplated course of action add to, or did it interfere with, this conviction?

In the West we mistrust self-denial carried to such lengths. We suspect pathological guilt or even pathological vanity. Does it not lead to pride of poverty, that subtlest temptation of the saints? Or to fanaticism in which the unseated ego is itself worshipped in the place of God (a temptation peculiar, perhaps, to Christian saints, with their passion for converting others)? Or to an indifference to the world, and a concentration on personal salvation which is a refined form of selfishness (this, the temptation of the life-denying Hindu)? The answer is, of course, that it can lead to all these things, and worse, for the victories of the spirit have never been achieved without risk. The self is like a cask which the saint must empty. The danger comes with the refilling. Is the new substance from God or is it merely old Nick cleverly disguised? Only ceaseless vigilance, sincerity and self-criticism can discriminate between the two. . . .

But why empty the self at all? To cross the dividing line between sainthood and mere goodness. When we say, "Oh, So-and-so is a saint," we usually mean that So-and-so gets a personal satisfaction out of doing good. This is pleasant and socially useful (So-and-so is always remarkably popular in the Junior Common Room), but it is not what India nor, for that

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

matter, medieval Christendom have thought of as sainthood. The true saint does not just *do* good; he *is*, at least in some degree, goodness. He transmits something greater than himself; he dwells in a realm beyond the reach of the most high-minded personal enjoyment. The neighbour who is always willing to help, the student who comes top of the popularity poll—such balanced and extraverted personalities can be created on the psychoanalyst's couch. But for the saint to extract the tough cork of egotism and empty the vessel of self so that God may take possession there is no such restful method. Three thousand years of experience cannot be gainsaid. He must tread the dramatic and dangerous road of mortification.

Not that Vinoba's mortification had about it anything exaggerated or questionable. It was always directly linked to the good of his fellows. Even if he denied himself salt, it was ostensibly because the poorest of his countrymen could not afford it. If he scavenged, it was to teach others a lesson of hygiene and to show that not even the most menial work should be despised. The health of his own soul was never the object in view, as it is for the *sadhu* on his bed of nails or the Catholic monk in one of the flagellant orders. Renunciation for the sake of human service—this is the power that Gandhi and Vinoba have rediscovered for us. Vinoba's renunciation was the more thorough for being undramatic: it gave him thirty years of training in obscurity. His intellectual arrogance slowly cracked. He was burnt clean of ambition and love of power.

But what of timidity and reserve, those subtler shadows cast by vanity? Would we be afraid of putting ourselves forward if we were not at the same time afraid of failure, of being laughed at, of not making contact? As long as Gandhi was alive, Vinoba could disguise his timidity as other-worldliness, playing the elusive sage whose mind was fixed on higher things. But with Gandhi's death even this last covering was stripped relentlessly off. Who else was left to fight his battles in the world? At first he hoped for someone to come forward, but there was

SAINT ON THE MARCH

nobody. Eighteen dispiriting months followed, during which he worked "through normal channels," helping to re-establish Moslem refugees. This allowed him, at the end, one last card—humility. His services were of no value to the country at large. He had proved it. The work of the world could be done much better by others. He was meant for the quiet seclusion of Paunar where money and politics were naughty words. But his followers were insistent. Blindly, obstinately they trusted the quality that Gandhi had seen in him. Drawing courage from their love, Vinoba accepted the truth. "For years I have been sleeping in the father's shadow. Awake, child, and face the world."

When an intellectual recluse, forty years a farmhand, becomes a mass leader, one would expect psychosomatic changes. Vinoba himself claims not to have noticed any change. It is all quite simple he told me. In the first stages of asceticism, a man is intolerant—like a sour fruit. Later he matures and, like the fruit, becomes sweeter. And he added, it is not till a man is fully detached that he can afford to play with love.

Tukdo Bhaj, one of India's folk poets, has put it like this: "When Gandhi died, Vinoba became as loving as he." And a journalist I met was even more precise. He had seen Vinoba immediately before and immediately after his first tour in Hyderabad. He would not, he told me, have thought he was the same man. Not that the bent figure with its curiously velvety skin, the matted hair and beard and homespun loin-cloth had changed. It was more a difference of quality that one sensed: a difference clearly mirrored in his eyes. Somehow, before, one had never noticed Vinoba's eyes. For they scarcely seemed to notice *you* while talking. It was more as if he talked *at* you than to you. But now his eyes at once riveted attention: grey-green and curiously youthful they seemed to invite you to laugh continually at the rest of his face, which still wore the gravity expected of a saint.

It was Vinoba's humour which had struck me when I met him the second time, just as Gandhi's humour had struck me

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

from the first. In modern India one is used to religion dressed in a long face, just as farther West it has assumed a hearty and synthetic grin. Vinoba and Gandhi remind one what real religion means—no discord at the heart of things. The world holds no worries for him who is practised in the presence of God. That is why even in 1954 Vinoba can afford to be amused. . . .

Of course Vinoba has not just suddenly grown this sense of humour. He possessed it before, but lacked that certainty with others which would have made its expression possible. His own life touched the average sensual world at too few points. As soon as he entered Hyderabad this unsuspected humour sprang to the attack fully armed. Communists received the first brunt of it. “Marxist literature is as wide and shoreless as the sea. Only a few dare venture towards the depths of *Das Kapital*. But most draw back, content with a mere dip in the shallower currents of propaganda that flow from Russia.” “Since our ancient scriptures, has anyone equalled the Communists in their boundless zeal for repetition?” Told that his ideas added up to Communism minus violence, he gave a cryptic smile. “Perhaps. But then you might say that two people were identical except that one breathed and the other was a corpse.”

Vinoba’s humour is very different from Gandhi’s. It is not people that he relishes, but ideas. This underlines the fact that, although, “when Gandhi died, Vinoba became as loving as he,” it was a different kind of love. Gandhi’s emotional equipment was very average: perhaps he even had more than his normal share of sensuality. For him there was no vow of chastity at the age of twelve, but a child marriage which resulted in a large family. He was nearly forty years old before he managed to shake himself free of the sexual instinct. He did so after a long conflict provoked by his acute moral sensitivity.

Sublimated, Gandhi’s emotional and sensual nature took on a different form. He became a “mother” fussing over the needs

SAINT ON THE MARCH

of a thousand "children"; and his family ranged from the humblest villager to viceroys and visiting British statesmen. He needed continual emotional companionship. He was personal, affectionate, lovable, capricious and teasing to those who were close to him: he delighted in pet names and delicious pleasantries that made every individual feel himself to be his special favourite. In return he gained a passionate and personal devotion. "That someone so great should have had time for *me*," has been the refrain of dozens of books of reminiscences written since his death.

Gandhi's deeply emotional nature sometimes misled him. Fanaticism spoke in the guise of conscience. His love of power was not always obliterated by his quest for humility. Indeed, it was perhaps the greatest triumph of his long life to have overcome this urge for power in those last years when the new India left him lonely and powerless on the heights where she had placed him. Could men have loved Gandhi in the way they did if he had not had these weaknesses? His strength came, it seems to me, from the fact that he was a very great—and very human—being.

How different is Vinoba! In him there are no such dramatic and enigmatical contrasts. All is clear and limpid. Visiting the *ashrams* round Sevagram where he had lived for twenty years, at once summed up and underlined the difference.

First I walked to Go-puri: three miles over the scrub-covered plain under the passionless stars. My companion, one of Vinoba's disciples from Pauniar, told me: "Vinoba says, 'Why gaze at the stars of the cinema when the stars of heaven have still to reveal their secrets?'" At Go-puri I slept out on the tarred roof of a brick villa, taking Vinoba's advice. Next door was the two-roomed cottage in which Jamnalal Bajaj, Vinoba's benefactor, ended his days in service to the Indian cow. When I left in the morning the flies in the two dozen empty milk churns outside the dairy sounded like a distant army singing on the march. We scrounged a bicycle for a dawn ride to Pauniar. The monkeys still lined the road. "What

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

kind of monkeys do you have in your country?” my companion asked.

The smallness of Paunar, Vinoba's old *Ashram*, compared to the continual slow spread of Sevagram, reflects the relative lack of drawing power in Vinoba's personality before he gave up *ashram* life in 1951. There are 5 acres irrigated by a “Persian wheel”—a linked chain of buckets which are lowered into the water round the wheel and which tip into the irrigation channels as they come up. A group of whitewashed cottages border an acre of millet, beyond is a wide well which Vinoba and two others cut through 58 feet of rock (“Why be disheartened when there is a pick-axe in my hand?”), with, scattered round it, some old bits of stone sculpture excavated in the process. At one end looms the gaunt, stripped, brick-built villa with a blind turret, given to Vinoba by Bajaj, and looking like a cross between a public convenience and a small town jail. The head of the *Ashram* to-day is a married man with four children who was spinning on the veranda of one of the cottages. “He took a vow of celibacy two and half years ago,” my informant told me, staring suspiciously at the youngest born—a twenty-months old baby—who insisted on catching hold of the spindle.

“Did Vinoba suggest that he take such a vow?” I asked.

“Oh, no. He took it of his own free will. Vinoba never prescribes penances. He regards that as an unattractive pastime. Besides, unless the penance suggested itself first to the person concerned of what value would it be?”

Twenty minutes later I was walking back to Sevagram along the route followed by Vinoba three years before when he left for Hyderabad: first the river then the tiny level crossing, where a notice board says in English: “Complaint Book Lodged with Crossing-keeper.”

As I pass I recall what Vinoba himself said to me: “The modern age puts a premium on sensuality. We would like to sow the seed in the field and take care at the same time not to

SAINT ON THE MARCH

have any crop. But is that scientific? Is it not rather a re-action from the idea of "original sin," the idea that all sensuality is sinful? If we were taught that controlled and purposeful sensuality was no sin but a sacred duty, would we find it so difficult to sublimate our passions?" Even on this subject, then, of which he has denied himself all first-hand knowledge, Vinoba talks lucid and unemotional common sense.

Vinoba is the detached and passionless messenger of God that Gandhi regretted not having become. That is why, from the first, the older man revered him as a teacher. In Vinoba the heart is there all right but it is completely under the control of the will. His love is impersonal, philosophical—he looks upon all men as the children of God and as a result treats them all equally. Whereas Gandhi treated everyone differently because of the particular child they were. If a small girl creeps up on to the platform while he is speaking, Vinoba pats her absent-mindedly on the head, but one feels he would do as much for anything else—animal or human—that happened to be near. When he walks, he walks alone; without the "human walking-sticks" which Gandhi used. He expects the impossible from himself—but not from others, unless they are ready to give it of their own unforced accord. Vigorously free of any entanglement with sex or money, he regards such renunciation as a personal witness to the ultimate social good rather than an immediately practical policy which others should follow. He has no fads about medicines—beyond refusing to make use of those which contain animal matter or which have been developed through cruel experiments. Being quite clear in his own mind that he is ready for death whenever it calls, he has decided that with so much work to do it is better for the moment to live.

But what about power? Is not this the one appetite that grows sharper with the years? And the only one, from which saints—able to blame their zeal on to the Almighty Himself—are not entirely free? But Vinoba, remember, after years of obscurity, was only prodded towards the limelight by his

“WHENCE HATH THIS MAN . . . ?”

colleagues—and even then at an age when most of us would think about retiring. Besides, *Bhoodan* has no membership and takes no resolutions, only vows. And in spite of the social and economic ideas to which Vinoba gives increasing emphasis, it is clear that he regards his own role merely as that of a catalyst. He hopes to precipitate a change of heart in others and to increase their moral power. Once that is achieved, it will be the duty of the people themselves to influence the politicians and parties towards the ideas that they have imbibed from him. But what if the movement itself refuses to continue in such a rarefied atmosphere? What if it grasps the fact that it has become one of the successors—perhaps the only successor—to a fast-declining Congress? That will be the moment for Vinoba to withdraw and for us to remember that he is not, like Gandhi, a politician saint, but a saint temporarily on the fringe of politics. “Fire merely burns; it does not worry whether anyone puts a pot on it, fills it with water and puts rice in it to make a meal. It burns, and that is the limit of its duty. It is for others to do theirs.” Gandhi the politician succeeded, but Gandhi the saint failed. India was freed but not converted. That is why Vinoba still sticks to the changing of hearts. . . .

I pause at the edge of a baking stubble field. It is only 7.30 (I left Paunar an hour before), but already ferociously hot. Slowly I limp over to a huge banyan tree and thread my way through its stems to the cool centre which has never seen the sun. As my eyes wander lazily among the branches, I am struck by a thought—was not Gandhi like a spreading banyan tree, in contact with the earth at 100 inconsistent points? Inventing a new spinning wheel or a new remedy for gastritis one moment, then the next conjuring India's first mass political party out of centuries of apathy and sloth? “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden.” One went to Gandhi and came away with one's sense of worth and value curiously enhanced. Vinoba, by contrast, moves from one problem to another in a logical sequence. He spreads an idea, not by

SAINT ON THE MARCH

arousing the personal devotion given to Gandhi, but by lifting the eyes of those who meet him to the stars. "Before Abraham was, I am."

On my walk out from Sevagram I had been refreshed by the night sky, on my walk back by a banyan. Vinoba and Gandhi . . . the lodestar and the spreading tree . . . The two poles of sainthood. The one a saint because of his enormous humanity, and because of the human values with which he managed to irradiate his politics and wordly activities. The other a saint because he has managed to empty himself of self-regard, and, taking over the values and activities of the first, to transcend his humanity so that he may become their instrument.

TO ESTABLISH RIGHTEOUSNESS

THE EVENING AFTER I had walked back from Paunar I left Sevagram for the first lap of my long journey home. On Wardha Station there was the usual muddle—only worse. For days I had been trying to book a seat in advance, but had been told that bookings were only accepted from Calcutta. Now the train had been signalled “full,” which meant that no one had a right to ascend it without the consent of the passengers already in the compartment. There was only one compartment in the whole train without luggage barricading its doors—a second-class one. However, although I managed to get in, the occupants would not let me stay. I spluttered furiously, but my mounting anger only begot a mounting opposition. They were sorry, they said, but I seemed to have forgotten that the English were no longer India’s rulers. When I refused to move, I was deposited—blankets, plastic bag and all—firmly back on the platform.

There was no other train to Bombay for twenty-four hours.

Yet this small, undignified incident held a curious revelation. I retired to my familiar haunt, the waiting-room, but this time not in my familiar mood of fury and despair. Instead, I found to my surprise that I was angry at my own anger. Was I being fair to the Indian railways? Hadn’t they in innumerable ways (meals, toilets, station amenities) improved their service since 1948? Wouldn’t any service have broken down under the pressure put on it in May? Besides, why hadn’t I handled the incident differently? If only I had said to my fellow passengers: “Look. We have ten minutes before the train is due to leave. Why can’t we discuss this question rationally? If I fail to convince you by the time the whistle blows, then I promise

SAINT ON THE MARCH

solemnly that I will get down without the slightest fuss. After all, don't let's forget that we are in the country of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhawe." Then I would have explained that my plane seat home was already booked and that in the few days left to me in India I still had much to do. Finally, I would have renounced any claim to the bunks which they had booked and were already occupying. If necessary, I would have shown myself ready to stand throughout the night. . . .

At the end of an hour I had rehearsed all the possible "leads" in the smallest detail and was fully prepared to deal with the next train-load of passengers when it arrived. . . .

It was at this point—roughly 2.35 a.m.—that I realised what Vinoba had done for me. He had given me back something which I had long possessed only in name. Faith. How else explain what I had experienced in these last few weeks?

Normally I have to rely on barbiturates to procure me sleep. Yet since meeting Vinoba I had slept without pills in positions of acute discomfort. Normally such is my unrequited passion for the past that a medley of old jazz numbers on the radio is enough to cripple me with nostalgia for hours. Yet now I found myself glancing backwards with no more than a tolerant shrug of recognition, for my eyes were fixed once more on the future. Normally I sit through the hour of Quaker Meeting with my mind obstinately harping on what to plant in the vegetable garden next week or what to say in to-morrow's important interview. . . . Yet I had sat for hours on end listening to Vinoba talking in unintelligible Hindi, my ego obliterated by a vision of the infinite mercy of God. Who has not echoed the words of the Elizabethan poet?

"Oh wearisome condition of humanity,
Born under one law—to another bound,
Vainly begot and yet forbidden vanity,
Created sick, commanded to be sound."

Who can ever forget those fleeting moments when the contraries magically dissolve? For me they had dissolved for six

whole weeks. Hot trains, bad food, blistering sunlight, an average of three hours' sleep in the twenty-four, quarrels at booking offices and misinformation everywhere? Such things, of course, could not be overlooked. Yet through them all I had felt something else: a steel thread of tranquillity that nothing had been able to break.

I have had faith before. But my faith was a routine, an intellectual habit. A faith that I ought to have faith, rather than faith itself. God seemed like one of those bright, jewelled visions in tempera painted by the blessed Florentine monk, Angelica, and now hung on the walls of our public galleries behind the protection of thick plate glass. When I looked from the front, seeking to understand its radiance, my own shadowy image peered out at me from the glass, clouding the vision behind. From the side? Here the vision became too dark, and oblique to affect my solitude. I needed something more substantial than this before I could change from the law under which I was born to the law by which I wanted to be bound. Not so much a redirection of will (repression never works on the temperamental), as a redirection of love: the substitution of a genuine love of God for mere theorising about Him. This alone could give emotional validity to the intellectual façade of faith, converting the *alter ego* to more constructive ends.

And all this you owe to an elderly ascetic with whom, in roughly three hours of conversation, you never discussed one single topic of personal interest—someone you will probably never see again and do not desire to see?

I remember an evening on the broken bank of a paddy field in yellowing sunlight. Vinoba is sitting on the bank for my last interview: a faint breeze awake in his beard and hair. He is talking of organisations and why he dislikes them. Suddenly he turns to Sumitra, who is as crisp and neat as a head schoolgirl at his side. As usual, she has been taking notes.

SAINT ON THE MARCH

“This little girl has been walking with us for the last three or four days. When she came she did not know how long she would stay. Perhaps she still does not know. Maybe she will leave us to-morrow. I do not worry. When she goes God will send someone else to take her place. Yesterday she showed me a report that she had written. But I declined to read it. I told her I would criticise it when it appeared in the papers. I must trust her while she is with me, so that she can give of her best.”

And Sumitra glances upwards and sticks her pencil in the strap of her sandal, pretending not to hear—just like a modest schoolgirl should behave when she knows herself praised. But it is *her* face that I look at while Vinoba is speaking—not his. Her ugly-beautiful face—for a moment radiance glows from its smooth honey coloured skin: she looks like a seraphic pug who has caught a sniff of paradise. And only the evening before she had complained that she found, Vinoba too cold and remote. . . .

Half an hour later comes my last prayer meeting. I am at the back, on the edge of the crowd. I am buoyed up once again with ideals which I thought I had lost for ever—ideals which seemed to have died with Gandhi. . . . I understand what the fishermen of Galilee once felt when they cast away their nets. But, no—that would not be right. Vinoba is quite without my tendency to sentimental extravagance. He would ask about my wife and family. Gently chide me for leaving them 4,000 miles away: remind me that dedication at the cost of those one loves is mere self-indulgence. I have never spoken to him about it and yet I can imagine him saying it all. And at the same time I know that I would accept what he said. There is something in him which one cannot fight against—something which goes straight to the heart. Yet it is nothing personal, nothing which conveys affectionate interest. Gently, unintentionally, ruthlessly, Vinoba holds up a mirror and shows you to yourself. He cannot help it. It is the effect of the light which is in him and which comes from elsewhere. . . .

TO ESTABLISH RIGHTEOUSNESS

He wants to pass this light on to you and then to send you away to act as it directs. Books, correspondence, personal relics, photographs—all the usual bric-à-brac with which disciples support themselves—seem, with Vinoba, curiously irrelevant. It is enough to have seen him and to know for a certainty that he exists. . . .

Or am I mad? Is all that I have seen and heard during these past weeks no more than a dream? Am I suffering from *dementia praecox* due to hunger and sunstroke?

Bombay seems to answer, "Yes." Gaudier than ever in the six years since I last saw it—there is a recent increase in export profits due to the Korean War—Bombay thinks it supremely comic that anyone should imagine a man with a stomach ulcer and chronic malaria able to solve India's land problem single-footed—or any other problem for the matter of that. My friends trot out all the familiar criticisms of *Bhoodan*—some of them so familiar that I thought they had died three years ago while Vinoba was still in Hyderabad. They are rather unpleasantly eager, too, to credit Vinoba with an amount of *uncultivable* land that is more than double what he actually possesses.

O.K. If you want statistics and practical results, here they are.

Three million, two hundred thousand acres given to *Bhoodan* by the end of April, 1954, of which some 2,000,000 is reasonably good land, and this from a total of 230,000 donors of whom one-third may have undergone a change of heart. Sixty thousand acres distributed to 20,000 families, mostly in Hyderabad and the United Provinces; distribution in the rest of the country now under way. Thousands of wells, bullocks, implements, many tons of seed also changing hands so that the new owners can begin to cultivate. One thousand workers—half paid Rs. 30s. a month by the Gandhi Memorial Fund, the other half receiving no more than board and lodging—accompanied by an unnumbered quantity of volunteers slowly

SAINT ON THE MARCH

spreading a network of faith across the countryside. The first mass movement since Independence and the first nation-wide peasant movement in the history of India beginning to take shape. . . .

Statistics apart, what about the more intangible results? The ceiling on land introduced in Hyderabad; the abolition of the *zamindaris* made law after years of talk elsewhere; land prices falling throughout the country to three times less than they were in 1952; land litigation amazingly reduced (once every disputed yard was solemnly contested in the courts); the ugly rumour of violent revolution dying down; confidence in the future imperceptibly replacing bitterness and apathy; the wealthy soft-peddalling their opposition to social change—has not *Bhoodan* played at least some part in all these things?

The future? Vinoba still has weapons unused in the arsenal of love. He could impose a fast on himself or launch a movement of non-co-operation 'in areas where the landlords' hearts are stubborn. . . .

Perhaps it is just this prospect of success which frightens you in Bombay? You don't want to treat *Bhoodan* seriously because it would be tiresome and uncomfortable to be roped in? That is why you take refuge in ridicule? But I have seen a miser—so mean that we were told he shaved his wife's head to save the expense of hair-oil—untie his purse strings as Vinoba drew near. Would it be long before there were signs of the same reluctant generosity even in Bombay?

What if Vinoba walked into London or New York? Would we Christians recognise in this elderly, half-naked Hindu one of the great saints, blood brother to St. Francis and St. Vincent de Paul? Perhaps not. Sadhu Sundar Singh, the most famous of Indian Christians, once described his co-religionists as "very dear, but very queer; very nice, but very narrow." And no doubt there are some of us who would think it almost blasphemous to suggest that we could have our faith revitalised by watching Vinoba at work.

TO ESTABLISH RIGHTEOUSNESS

"I stand on the firm rock of Christ,
All others are but slipping sand."

I remember Vinoba quoting this evangelical hymn to me and then adding, with a sly twinkle over the top of his bifocal spectacles:

"How can you Christians be so sure of it? Have you ever tried the others?"

To Vinoba there is "neither Jew, nor Greek, bond nor free"—and he might add neither Christian, Moslem nor Hindu as well. To his fellow Hindus he says: "Why go to the Ganges to purify yourselves in holy water? The ocean of love is around us always. Let us bathe ourselves in that." Each religion has its own way of seeking this ocean. That the members of one faith should despise the members of another, that we should close our ears to any new or freshly stated truth because it carries a different label—these things, to him, seem blasphemous indeed. . . . The second line of resistance to sainthood will be different. Gandhi and Vinoba, you say? The lodestar and the banyan tree? Well, we can take Gandhi. For we prefer our saints to be leafed, branched and rooted. But a lodestar—someone who has transcended personality—that sounds glacial, impossibly austere and grim.

The point is of course that Vinoba's lack of "personality" is not a defect. It is the inevitable price he has had to pay for the great gift that he brings us. "Let only that much be left of me whereby I may name Thee my all." And with his usual mathematical precision, Vinoba has calculated the sum exactly. The joy and radiance of which he has become the vehicle have a clear field of action and they shine forth from everything he does. The frowsty beard, loose legs and arms, the puffing cheeks and odd little routine which they have worked out for their most effective functioning—some day these things will be lost in a distant and anonymous village. But the radiance goes on. . . .

This radiance trusts *you*, it is waiting to fall through *your*

SAINT ON THE MARCH

altered heart if only you let it; that is Vinoba's message and the secret of his success. Tangible evidence of the radiance has never failed to move mankind. Whoever, in whatever part of the world had the courage and faith to become a transmitter would have the same "success." They could once again make our "techniques of social change" look like children's toys.

At Bombay Airport friends clustered round like visitors to a jail watching from behind barricades as the prisoners were sealed in their luxury cell. Soon rocks, palms, the Parsi Towers of Silence slid back into limbo. *Dhoti*-clad figures became twigs tied with a pocket handkerchief. The sea appeared—a cauldron of liquid pewter, boiling over the rim of the rocky coast.

I am back again once more near Bodh Gaya. It is 4 a.m. I have missed prayers as usual, in spite of good intentions. As I arrive, Mahadevi Thai's voice floats away as flat and tuneless as ever. But this morning it has a curiously affecting quality, for I am leaving the *Bhoodan* party in an hour's time and this is to be my last glimpse of Vinoba. . . .

The Air Hostess offered me brandy, whisky or gin and orange. As I was the only Westerner in the front part of the plane she had naturally imagined alcohol to be my main interest now that we were out of range of Bombay's prohibition.

I took a boiled sweet instead and sucked it thoughtfully.

There is a movement among the squatting figures, a lighting of lamps, then Vinoba's laughter like a golden guinea rattling in a tin. Heavens, they are leaving already! No hope of a single parting word? I run down the lane to the end of the village. This is where Vinoba will turn east *en route* for the next halt.

Only just in time. Vinoba is striding full speed ahead, the little group of white-clad figures jostling behind in the narrow lane with its mud-walled cottages rising like the banks of a dried river on either side. Except for a goat, nobody else in

TO ESTABLISH RIGHTEOUSNESS

the village is up to see him pass. Perhaps I shall get a special smile.

But Vinoba gives me the merest glance. As his hands come up in a swift, soft greeting, the lantern held in one of them throws his face into sharp and fleeting relief. This makes him thinner and sharper than he really is—punching the holes deeper and harder under his hollowing cheek-bones—but at the same time it gives his eyes an astonishing softness and lustre. For an instant as they glance out at me, mild and expressionless, they seem to bear as if from the midst of a great sickness, witness to that immortal health which will never weaken or die.

I gaze after him as the circle of light trembles away across the fields. What is it the *Gita* says?

“In every age I come back
To deliver the holy,
To destroy the sin of the sinner,
To establish righteousness.”

An old man cowed in white homespun and carrying a torch, his long legs padding rhythmically through the dust. Far off in front of him the first faint streaks of dawn. The old man hurrying towards sunrise as if racing against death itself, and the six figures behind stumbling to keep up.

Do I realise as I watch that this image has, in some curious way, made real to me that promise given thousands of years ago in the *Gita*? And that this is the image I shall conjure to my aid in private battles with doubt and despair?

I turn up the lane to snatch another hour of sleep.

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